USEFULNESS, TRUTH, and Excellency

OF THE

Christian Revelation

DEFENDED

Against the Objections contain'd in a late Book,

INTITLED.

Christianity as old as the Creation, &c.

By JAMES FOSTER. K



The THIRD EDITION, Corrected.

Μέμνενο ότι κὸ τὸ μετατίθεσθαι, κὸ ἔπεσθαι τω διοςθούντε, όμοίως ΕΛΕΤΘΕΡΌΝ έςι. Marc. Antonin.

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Christian Revelation

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PREFACE.

THAT infidelity has increas'd among us very much of late, is a general observation. And as we believe Christianity to be a rational and excellent institution, it must seem the more strange to us, that this should happen in an age that boafts of free inquiry, and would be thought neither to receive, nor reject, any religious opinions, but upon folid grounds. I shall not pretend to assign any causes of it that are universal, and much less to determine positively that it always proceeds from vitious motives, and the influence of irregular passions; because there are innumerable prejudices that infensibly byass and mislead the mind, where there is both a good understanding, and an honest heart; and general charges (which is the utmost length we can go; for of the principles and views by which particular persons are influenc'd nothing can be known certainly, till the secrets of all hearts are reveald) general charges, I say, of infincerity, perverseness, and wilful error, are

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as easily brought by bigots and enthusiasts against the opposers of false religions, as by the defenders of the true against their antagonists. There is one thing, however, that appears to be a very strong and common prejudice against the Christian religion, which I cannot omit, fince it depends entirely on Christians themselves, and consequently, as they might have prevented, it is not yet out of their power to remove it; I mean those corruptions in doctrine, and gross superstitions in worship, by which they have defac'd the simplicity and beauty of true Christianity, and which have been urg'd indeed with greater zeal than morality itself. These the adversaries of our religion, without examining farther, blend with its original and effential doctrines; and thus it is condemn'd for no other reason, but because it bas been misrepresented. A melancholy reflection this! that Christians should furnish infidels with the choicest weapons to attack their own cause; but at the same time, on the side of unbelievers, a sure argument of a shallow and superficial judgment in these points, and which destroys all their pretences to fair reasoning. For such a method of proceeding is not doing common justice to the writings of the New Testament; nay farther, if the principles of any religion are to be taken thus at second hand, and rejected without being inquir'd into, there is no rule left whereby to distinguish between true and false religions; and 'tis impossible that any revelation, which God may communicate to mankind, should ever make its way in the world,

even though it be in itself most perfect, and brings with it the highest and noblest credentials.

THE author of Christianity &c. like most other opposers of revelation, puts on an affected concern for the purity of the Christian religion, and would be thought to do it honour by shewing it to be only a republication of the law of nature, the original and universal religion of mankind. And indeed these writers are not to be blam'd for acting thus in disguise, till they can declare openly against it without danger. But it were to be wish'd, methinks, that all unnecessary terrors being remov'd, they might no longer be forc'd to the inconfistent pretence of exalting Christianity by destroying it, and honouring it by representing all its peculiar doctrines as absurd and senseless. In the mean time, as matters now stand, if we would come at their true fentiments, we must interpret all their books by this key. Then we shall be in no danger of being deceiv'd, either by specious titles, or seeming concessions. For the title, which our author, in particular, has given to his performance, fince 'tis most evidently his intention to subvert the Christian religion, can't but be universally understood to mean this, and this only, Christianity as old as the creation, or good for nothing; or, which amounts to the same, Christianity, the moral doctrines of it excepted, superstition and enthusiasm.

IN my remarks upon this discourse I have not consider'd it chapter by chapter (a great part of it being nothing as all to my purpose; and for the rest, the same sentiments being often repeated, and falling in here and there without much method or connection) but have endeavour'd to digest the substance of it, so far as the cause of Christianity is concern'd, under proper heads, both for the greater entertainment, and advantage, of the reader. Nor have I carried the opposition so far, as to dispute all the principles in it on which a great stress is laid; because some of them appear to me, if rightly explain'd (a point indeed in which our author is very defective) to be rational and just; and only the consequences he draws from them to be fallacious and sophistical.

THUS, for instance, I make no scruple to allow, that reason, if it be rightly improved, is sufficient to discover all the principles and duties of natural religion; or, that 'tis sufficient, at all times, to teach men all that God requires of them in their various circumstances; and have shewn, that notwithstanding this, when reason is actually corrupted and darken'd, a revelation is never the less desirable, or useful. But if we go farther, and urge the actual corruption of the world as a proof of the insufficiency of reason, in itself, to teach men natural religion and morality, or those

those duties, which they are indispensably oblig d to know and practise in order to their acceptance with God; and confequently makes a revelation not only of advantage in certain circumstances, but absolutely, and at all times, necessary; besides that we shall, I fear, hardly be able to account for its not being universal, fince all our reasonings are form'd upon the general necessities of mankind; besides this, I fay, we can never answer the very same argument retorted upon us from the ignorance and Superstition of Christians, against the sufficiency even of revelation. In truth the argument is bad either way; for indolence, prejudice, and vitious affections will pervert and darken the plainest rule. And as the corruptions of the Heathen world, if they had been much greater than they really were, would, no more than they do now, bave inferr'd the infufficiency of reason as a guide in itself; it must follow by the same rule, that the degeneracy among Christians, though it could be shewn to be more gross than any Pagans were ever chargeable with, is no rational prejudice either against the perfection, or perspicuity, of the Christian revelation. For 'tis most evident, that in both cases the event is not owing to a defect in the original rule, but to mens not attending to it, or substituting other falle rules in the place of it; and the prevalency of ignorance, superstition, and vice, more in some ages than in others, may arise from a great variety of circumstances, which, when they happen to concur, may make the A 4 plain-

The PREFACE.

plainest and most complete rule of less use, than, in different circumstances, another that is vastly more obscure and impersect.

I HAVE nothing to add, but that, as I shall be ready, upon conviction, to correct any errors in the reasoning part; so, if the author of Christianity &c. can shew that I have misrepresented his sense, or treated him, in any respect, uncivilly, I promise to ask his pardon, and give him, publicly, all the satisfaction be can desire.

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Christian Revelation

DEFENDED.



S RELIGION is of the highest importance to mankind, free debates about it ought above all things to be encouraged. This is the only way to fettle the true

nature of it, and fix it upon a folid foundation, that truth and falshood, superstition and rational piety, may not equally prevail under that venerable name: and to support it by methods of restraint and violence is not only an infringement of the most sacred natural rights of mankind, but a dishonour to religion itself. It makes a good cause suspected, and gives every little insunation of its adversaries,

without proof, the air of probability. And as all honest men have no concern but for truth, and never suffer their passions, prejudices, or worldly interests to influence their religious inquiries, they can desire nothing more than that the argument should be clearly stated, and urg'd in its utmost strength on both sides; and must be as ready to give up any particular scheme of religion upon sufficient evidence of its falshood, as they were to defend and propagate it while they believ'd it to be true. Such persons must be very unwilling that the civil magistrate should interpose, to do that by coercion and terror, which can only be effected by reason and persuasion.

For my own part, I think it an inestimable happiness, that we live not only in an inquihtive age, that will take nothing upon trust, but in a land of liberty, where persons may urge their objections against the establish'd religion with much more freedom, than in many other countries that are called by the Christian name; in which the people, not being allow'd the use of their reason, and free inquiry, are swallowed up in the groffest enthusiasm and superstition, and slaves in a double sense, both to their Princes and their Priests. May this happy liberty increase, which I take to have a close connection even with our givil liberty. Let those who do not believe the Christian religion be allow'd to throw off all disguises, and attack it with all the skill and strength of argument they are capable of. Let not such as write

write in defence of it claim any priviledge above their opponents, merely because they write on the popular and orthodox fide of the question, fince the natural rights of both parties are equal. We need not be afraid of the consequences: for truth can never suffer by being brought to the most critical test of impartial reason; and it is the interest of mankind that falfbood should be detected and exposed. And as the books which for a few years past have been publish'd in favour of Infidelity, particularly The Grounds and Reafons, &cc. have been of great service to Christianity, by imploying feveral excellent pens in its defence, who have fet the evidence of its divine authority in a clearer and stronger light than ever; fo I make no doubt but that the author of a late book, intitled, Christianity as old as the Creation, will be the occasion of fuch folid defences of the excellency and advantages of the Christian revelation, as will establish the fincere and impartial more firmly in the belief of it. If the following discourse contributes to this good defign, it will need no farther apology.

This book, the argument of which I propose to consider so far as the cause of Christianity is concern'd in it, is wrote in the main in a handsome and genteel manner, and therefore, I think, the author deserves to be treated civilly. There are several excellent things in it, especially upon the head of natural religion. And what he has offer'd to shew B 2

the mischievous tendency of superstition, and that the true religion has been most abominably corrupted, by placing it in infignificant ceremonies, and incomprehenfible or otherwise useles speculations, which have no influence upon moral goodness but to obstruct and pervert it, is unanswerable. But as the ingenious author proceeds a great deal farther, and the main drift of his reasoning strikes directly at the truth of Christianity, and its usefulness as a divine revelation, it will be expected that his arguments upon this head should be fully confider'd; and he must not take it amiss, if this be done with the same freedom which he himself has us'd, in considering the arguments that are urg'd on the contrary fide of the question. Let me only observe, that the dispute between us is not all about the supreme and immutable excellency of the religion of nature, nor whether this, which is by far the greatest and best part of Christianity, be as old as the creation, and as extensive as human nature; it is not, whether it be the chief defign of revelation to explain and restore this primitive religion in its original purity and perfection, and to affift and promote the regular and universal practice of it; nor whether reafon be our ultimate rule in all our religious inquiries, a rule by which revelation itself must be judg'd: for the affirmative in all these questions is admitted. I shall therefore mention them as allow'd principles, and no farther than the nature of the argument requires; which may be reduc'd to the following heads.

Chap.

Chap. I. OF the advantages of a revelation, and particularly of the Christian; and of the use and evidence of miracles.

Chap. II. VINDICATING the conduct of Providence in not making the Christian revelation univerfally known; and proving that this is confistent with the perfections of God, and confequently with the notion of its being a divine revelation.

Chap. III. SHEWING that we have a fufficient probability, even at this distance, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the new testament; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth and uncorruptedness of a traditional religion; with an answer to the arguments drawn from the change of languages, the different use of words, the style and phrase of scripture, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

Chap. IV. A GENERAL defence of pofitive commands.

Chap. V. A PARTICULAR vindication of the peculiar positive institutions of Christianity.

UNDER one or other of these heads, I shall have occasion to consider all this author's reasoning, so far as the controversy a-

bout revelation is concern'd. But if any part of it shall seem not to fall in so naturally, or in such exact order as might be wish'd, I hope it will be consider'd, that 'tis very difficult to observe strict order in remarks upon so large a book, in which the same things are often repeated; and objections are not urg'd in any regular method, but lie scatter'd here and there, and mix'd with other things of a quite different kind: and that this will obtain the candid reader's excuse.

CHAP.

CHAP. I.

Of the advantages of a revelation, and particularly of the Christian; and of the use and evidence of miracles.

EXPECT it will be fuggested here that I this part of my defign is needless, because the author of Christianity &c. allows *, "That when men do not pay a due regard to " the most perfect religion of nature, but mix " with it human inventions, it may, then, be " agreeable to the divine goodness to send per-" fons to recall them to a more strict observa-" tion of it." And in another place he says +, " But first, I must premise, that in supposing " an external revelation, I take it for granted, " that there is sufficient evidence of a person " being fent by God to publish it; nay, I " farther own, that this divine person by " living up to what he taught, has fet us a " noble example; and that as he was highly " exalted for fo doing, fo we, if we use our " best endeavours, may expect a suitable re-" ward. This, and every thing of the same " nature, I freely own, which is not incon-" fistent with the law of God being the same, " whether internally, or externally reveal'd."

THESE, it must be own'd, are large concessions; but as they do not appear to be re-

* P. 283.

concileable with other parts of this author's performance, nor with the general reasoning that runs thro' the whole of it, I think they are not much to be regarded. Very ingenious writers are apt sometimes to contradict themselves; or to say things in order to disguise their fentiments, and as falvoes to which they may have recourse, if they should happen to be push'd hard in the main argument. And thus the author of Christianity &c. has in several places spoken of the Christian religion, as if he believ'd and acknowledg'd it to be a divine revelation; though it must appear to every reader that 'tis impossible it should be so upon his principles, fince 'tis not a universal revelation, and contains some things in it merely positive; and consequently, that by urging these principles he design'd to undermine it, and reduce mankind to the mere religion of reason and nature. In like manner, notwithstanding the passages above cited, nothing can be more plain, than that he magnifies the powers of reason with a view to lessen or destroy the use of revelation. But whatever his real defign was, fince the generality of his readers will most probably understand him thus, as all that I have met with do; and some perhaps may be influenc'd by his arguments, if they are not examin'd, and shewn to be weak and inconclusive, to think that a revelation was needless; I look upon this as a sufficient apology for my proceeding in the method I at first propos'd, whereby I shall have

Christian revelation defended. 9

an opportunity of doing justice in some meafure to this important subject.

Now the fundamental principles, upon which our author proceeds, are these. " If " God has given mankind a law, he must have " given them likewise sufficient means of knowing it; he would, otherwise, have de-" feated his own intent in giving it: fince a " law, as far as 'tis unintelligible, ceases to be " a law. If God, at all times, was willing " that all men should come to the knowledge of " his truth; his infinite wildom and power " could at all times find fufficient means, for " making mankind capable of knowing what " his infinite goodness design'd they should " know." -- * " If God never intended " mankind should at any time be without re-" ligion, or have false religions; and there " be but one true religion, which ALL have " been ever bound to believe, and profess; I " can't fee any heterodoxy in affirming, that " the means to effect this end of infinite wif-"dom must be as universal and extensive as " the end itself; or that all men, at all times, " must have had sufficient means to discover " whatever God defign'd they should know, " and practife." - And " the use of those fa-" culties, by which men are distinguish'd from " brutes, is the only means they have to dif-" cern whether there is a God; and whether " he concerns himself with human affairs,

" or has given them any laws; and what these laws are." *

WE may, for ought I see, allow all this, and yet a revelation may be never the less expedient and useful. For if we suppose the utmost the ingenious author can justly expect, namely, that the reason of mankind is capable of discovering all the important principles and precepts of natural religion, all those duties they owe to God and their fellow creatures, or which relate to the right government of their affections and appetites; and that, in this sense, 'tis sufficient to direct them how to behave in the various circumstances and relations of human life; all that can be infer'd from hence is, that it may, but not that it certainly will, produce this desirable effect. On the contrary, 'tis as plain that it may not; but that notwithstanding their rational faculties, men may be ignorant of some great and essential branches of morality. For reason can only be serviceable to us in directing our moral conduct, if it be cultivated and improv'd; and even felfevident truths may be unknown, if they are not confider'd and attended to; and much more the principles of natural religion, of which the utmost that can be faid is, that they are capable of strict demonstrative proof, but are not knowable by intuition; so that those faculties " by which we are distinguish'd from " brutes," and which, + " if they are us'd " after the best manner we can, must an-

* P. 5.

† Ibid.

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Christian revelation defended. 1

"were the end for which God gave them, and justify our conduct," may be so perverted by vitious and irregular prejudices, that the very men who are thus dignified by their reason, and capable by a right use of it of forming a true judgment of what is fit and becoming in every circumstance, may grow rude and wild, having very little sense of the eternal difference of good and evil, and being almost entirely govern'd by animal instincts and passi-ons.

THE only thing that can render a revelation absolutely useless is this, that reason not only may, but must, bring men to the Knowledge of God's will; that it is not only a sufficient, but certain and infallible means to obtain this end. But this is inconfistent with their being free agents, and fit subjects of moral government, which necessarily includes in its idea, that they may choose whether they will exercise their reafon, or not, and by a neglect and abuse of it fink into the most gross and deplorable ignorance. And in such a state of corruption as this (which, 'tis possible, for the very same reason that it may happen in any fingle instance, may be universal) the advantage of a revelation will be altogether as great, as if men were unavoidably ignorant of the great truths of morality. For how they come to be out of the way is not the question, whether it proceeds from a defect in their natural powers, or from want of attention, and not using those powers as they ought. In both cases 'tis certain that they need to be fet

fet right, and recover'd to a just sense of their duty, and happiness; and that an external revelation which rectifies errors their in points of morality, the most fatal errors that reasonable creatures can fall into, must, whatever we determine concerning the sufficiency of reason, if rightly exercis'd, to have taught them better, be eminently useful, and an instance of great goodness in the supreme governour of the world.

LET us explain this matter a little farther, fince 'tis of the utmost importance, and what the whole dispute about the expediency and usefulness of a revelation plainly turns upon. Florid declamations upon the sufficiency of buman reason are certainly of very little weight against the general observation of mankind, and undoubted matter of fact. Now 'tis unquestionably true in fact, whatever the cause of it be, that there is nothing the bulk of mankind are more averse to, than serious thought and confideration; and nothing in which we are more likely to be disappointed than if we expect from them, that they will fet themselves to examine and reason clearly and distinctly, even upon subjects of the greatest moment. Their indolence makes them take up with commonly receiv'd principles, and fwallow them implicitly; their passions and prejudices prevent their making impartial inquiries: and tho they are reasonable creatures, constant experience teaches us, that if they are not taught, if right and just Sen-

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fentiments are not inculcated and impress'd upon their minds, they are apt to run wild, and become a parcel of uncultivated undisciplined savages, possessed indeed of the powers of reason and reflection, but without rational and well-digested notions of the fundamental points of religion and morality.

FOR what is it but a better education, and better instruction, that distingushes the politer parts of the world from the most ignorant and barbarous nations? Have they not ALL ALIKE the faculty of reason? And yet, notwithstanding this common gift of the great Creator and the improvements it is capable of, in fome countries, knowledge and civility, just notions of God, of human nature, and of the eternal and immutable distinction of good and evil, prevail; while others are overrun with darkness and prejudice, and there is scarce any difference, but in the outward form, between men and brutes. We fee plainly, that in every age, and in all parts of the world, the common people have fallen in with the established religion, however absurd and extravagant; and that they have always been tenacious of the principles instill'd into them in their education, whether right or wrong. In Heathen nations at this day, the most monstrous superstition and idolatry is practised with the greatest reverence and zeal; and in Popish countries, the worst corruptions of Christianity, and even of natural religion, are embraced and contended for, as the only scheme

of belief and practice that can render men acceptable to God. The people never once fulpeet, that 'tis so much as possible any part of their religion may be false; but, on the contrary, seem to believe, that 'tis a sin to entertain any doubts about it: which makes their errors in a manner invincible. Nay, does not our author himself allow, that mankind are very apt to be imposed upon, and that not-withstanding the boasted sufficiency and perfection of their reason, they are easily betrayed into the most ridiculous and hurtful superstition, and into a belief of, and bigotted attachment to, such principles, as undermine the foundations of religion and virtue?

THIS stupidity, and implicit submission of the understanding in religious matters, is not the peculiar foible of the present age, but was most notorious when Christianity was first published to the world. The sentiments and practices of mankind were both very depraved, and the corruption was almost universal. Idolatry, one small nation only excepted, and they despis'd and bated by the rest, overspread the face of the whole earth. The common people, every where, entertained the most unworthy and dishonourable notions of their Gods. The Jews represented the almighty and gracious Creator of all things, who has a kind and benevolent regard to the whole rational creation, as confining his favour to them alone, and overlooking, abandoning, and devoting to destruction all mankind besides; which made

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made them narrow and felfish, conceited of their own superior priviledges, and insolent and cruel to all who were not of their religion, And the poetic theology of the Heathens, which feems to have been their establish'd religion, and the general belief of the vulgar, imputed to their Deities the groffest impurities, and most infamous immoralities, such as murders, rapes, incests, and other the most black and monstrous crimes; which had a natural tendency to corrupt the manners of their worshippers, and gave a fanction to the worst of vices. And accordingly in the politest nations, some of the facred rites, which were folemnized in honour of the Gods, were so abominably leud and bestial, as to raise the utmost horror in every mind that has a sense of virtue or decency.

NAY, even a considerable part of that public-spiritedness, and love of their country, for which they are so highly celebrated, was nothing else but a zeal for their own particular interest, in opposition to the general good of the world. It was a rude and barbarous ambition to aggrandize themselves by conquering, oppressing, and enslaving other nations. And of consequence, their fortitude, contempt of danger, and the like, which, in the support of an interest that is truly bonourable, and in an afferting and defending the common rights of mankind, are great and beroic virtues, becoming the dignity of human nature, being animated by fuch base views, and exerted in so unjust a cause, were very mischievous qualities, destruc-

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tive of the true principles of focial virtue and happiness. Indeed they eminently distinguish'd themselves by a noble ardour and zeal for civil liberty at home, and by the many brave efforts they made against arbitrary and tyrannical schemes for enflaving and oppressing their own country; at the same time that they were a faction against the natural rights and liberties of mankind, and spread flavery and terror through the world. But though I would be far from difparaging this brave and useful spirit, I cannot help observing, that an attachment to the true interests of any one society, however excellent in its conftitution laws and customs. is but a low attainment, in comparison of a love to the whole community of mankind, and a concern for universal liberty and happiness; nay, it may proceed in a great measure from felfish principles, the happiness of particular perfons, of their families and posterity, being neceffarily included in that of the fociety of which they are members; and there is too much reasonto suspect, that there was actually something of this in the case of the old Greeks and Romans, fince by their arms and conquests they not only violated, in the most notorious manner, the law of difinterested and universal benevolence, but even the common rules of justice and equity. Many more instances might be added of the deplorable corruption of religion and morality in the world, before our Saviour's appearance. And,

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I M A Y ask now, where was that clear light of reason all this while, the universality of which, and its sufficiency, at all times, to directo men in every branch of their duty, is fo much insisted upon, in order to represent an external revelation as altogether needless? Was it not very much clouded and obscured; and were not the notices it gave vaftly imperfect and confus'd, with respect to the very fundamental principles of true piety and virtue?

IT must indeed be owned, that God did not leave bimself entirely without witness in the Gentile world; having not only implanted in all the faculty of reason, but raised up, at different times, several persons of a more refin'd genius, who cultivated their understandings with great care and diligence, faw thro' the idolatry and enthusiasm of the vulgar, and made confiderable improvements in the knowledge of morality. But, notwithstanding this, ignorance and superstition triumphed among the common people, infinitely the greatest part of mankind, without controul. So that the state and circumstances of the world in general plainly required the extraordinary affiftance of a revelation, to recover mankind to the knowledge of the one true God, the maker and governour of the universe, and to just and worthy notions of his perfections and providence; to restore religion to its native purity and lustre, which was buried, and almost quite lost, under a heap of abfurd and entravarant

vagant rites and ceremonies, many of which were shocking to modesty and scandalous to human nature; and to settle morality, and the social virtues themselves upon their true and proper foundation.

ITHINK it will be but little to the purpose to ask here, whether Philosophy was not fufficient to reform the world without the help of a particular revelation from heaven? For the same may be said of Philosophy as of the reason of mankind in general, that whatever it was capable of in the abstract nature of the thing, 'tis plain in fact it did not answer this end. And farther, there was very little reafon to expect this defireable effect from it. For very few of the people had either leisure or inclination to attend the schools of the Philosophers; or if they had, their lectures of morality were not plain simple precepts, adapted to vulgar understandings, but such abstract reasonings as are above the capacity of the generality of mankind: and which, very probably, instead of fixing them in clear and diftinet principles, would have puzzled and confounded their natural notions of good and evil. The greatest reformation that Philosophy feems, in fact, to have brought about in . the most civiliz'd nations, was the introducing wifer schemes of government, for the preservation of outward order, and the peace of fociety. But as the most excellent laws which were enacted with a view to this, doubtless a truly laudable defign, aim'd at nothing farther

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than regulating the external behaviour, and did not extend to the dispositions of the mind and the inward principles of action, nor preferibe rules for the right government of the Passions, in which alone the essence of true virtue consists; scarce any thing was really done, whatever we allow it possible that Philosophy might have done, towards promoting the perfection of mankind, and shewing them their duty, as reasonable and accountable creatures.

However, let us suppose, tho we have no reason in the world to believe that it was really the case, that the common people actually learn'd from their Philosophers the justest notions of their duty towards their fellowcreatures. With respect to religion they were entirely under the conduct and government of their Priests; who enslav'd their understandings to fuch enthufiaftic principles, inculcated fuch weak and impious stories of their Gods, and imposed so many ridiculous, and some such sensual and barbarous, rites in their worship, as having a direct tendency to corrupt their manners, must of consequence render their knowledge of morality, had it been ever so exact, in a great measure useles. With these fundamental errors in religion, subversive of all true piety, and of the obligations of moral virtue, Philosophy did but little concern itself. And yet 'tis undeniable, that in these points the bulk of the world most needed a reformation, because their religion gave a low and vicious turn to their minds, and very much defac'd their

their natural conscience of good and evil. On the contrary, the Philosophers generally speaking, tho they might secretly despise, and laugh at, the idolatry, weakness, and credulity of the People, whether for want of honesty, or courage, or because they thought it a piece of state-convenience and policy that the vulgar should be kept in ignorance, rather encouraged than attempted to put a stop to it, by falling in with the established superstition. Thus did their example give a kind of sanction and authority to the general corruption; the admirers of their superior wisdom were plunged deeper into it; and there was less likelihood, perhaps, than if there had never been any Philosophers at all, of their extricating themselves out of it.

AND, not to infift upon their want of proper authority to inforce their doctrines, and get them to be receiv'd as laws binding conscience, and standing unalterable rules for the conduct of mankind; the differences there were amongst them even with respect to some principles of morality; and several other circumstances that might be mentioned, which plainly shew how utterly improbable 'tis, that Philosophy, if left to itself, would have reform'd the errors and vices of the world; I shall only add, that the bulk of mankind, instead of being establish'd in the belief of a future state, by the sensiments and reasonings of the Philosophers about it, were more likely to be unsettled and lost in confusion. For the vulgar feem to have been the only firm and fleady believers of this great article of natural religion; while, while, of the Philosophers, some denied it, and others doubted of it, and the wifest and best did not think and argue clearly and consistently upon this important subject: but though they sometimes spoke of a future immortality with great plainness, and with an air of considence, as a thing of which they were strongly persuaded, they deliver'd themselves at other times with the utmost besitation and uncertainty.

INDEED the notions which prevailed among the generality concerning a future state of rewards and punishments, being little else but poetical tales and fictions, defign'd rather to amuse and strike the imagination, than to give a rational account of things, were in many respects childish and trifling. And it was highly defireable, for the honour of the divine wisdom, and the greater encouragement of virtue, that such false notions should be rectify'd. But how was this to be done? Surely it could not be by applying to the uncertain light of Philosophy, and submitting to the direction of fuch unstable guides as had not so much as fix'd their own principles, without an equal, or perhaps greater, inconvenience; because, though they might by their superior reason have given the people juster sentiments of a future state, they would have left them in doubt about the thing itself. And from scepticism with respect to this great principle of natural religion, and, which is the direct consequence of it, infidelity (the common people, generally, not being exact enough to distinguish between doubting and

and not believing at all) no good effect could possibly follow: but the belief of it, though in some particulars very idle and romantic, might excite many, especially of the lower fort, as far as they had clear notions of their duty, to regard and practise it.

AND now in such an universal degeneracy when mankind were abandon'd to the groffest idolatry, and swallow'd up in ignorance and superstition, and had scarce any remains of the true uncorrupted religion of nature; when the powers of reason and Philosophy were either not employ'd to restore them to their original state, or after they had done their utmost were found to be ineffectual; and tho they dispers'd some good notions of civility, order, and decency in outward life, contributed but very little towards regulating the principles of morality, and fettling religion upon its rational and just foundation; nay, farther, when, all circumstances consider'd, there was so little likelihood that a reformation could come from this quarter: I fay, in such a state of corruption as this, nothing of which, I am perfuaded, has been exaggerated, and amplify'd beyond the truth, but rather feveral particulars omitted, that would give us a stronger idea of the deplorable condition into which the world was funk; who, that has any notion of the importance of religion, and its tendency to promote the happiness of mankind, will pretend to fay, that a revelation was not extremely defireable, and might not be

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of the greatest advantage? or that the Christian revelation in particular, which made such momentous discoveries, and discoveries that were so much wanted, relating to the unity of God, the rational and acceptable method of worshipping him, and the truths of natural religion, which were so generally corrupted and darken'd, was not a singular instance of God's great goodness to his creatures, and worthy to be receiv'd with the utmost gratitude and thankfulness?

THIS point is so plain, that 'tis almost a shame to enlarge upon it. Let a man speculate ever fo finely upon the natural sufficiency of reason, will that convince us, when we look abroad into the world, and confider the folly and enthufiasm that generally abounds, that men may not in fact be stupidly ignorant of those things, which it most of all concerns them to know? Will reason, if it be not improv'd and cultivated, carry them any farther than mere sense and instinct? Or is a capacity of thinking and confidering a probability that they will think and confider? Is it an argument that they do, in opposition to the unanimous fense of all ages and nations? May not a revelation then, when men have fuffer'd their reason to be perverted, so that really, whatever it might have done, it affords them no light whereby to discover the principles of true religion, be in all respects as useful, as if they were naturally incapable of forming right notions of their duty without

it? May it not be very useful, though it be not absolutely necessary to the happiness of mankind? i. e. Tho we should allow, that the great governour of the world requires of none to know more, than may fairly be expected from persons in their circumstances, and surrounded with their particular difficulties and prejudices, for which all favourable allowance will be made; and that their acting up to the light they enjoy, however impersect, is sufficient to procure his approbation and favour.

INDEED the author of Christianity &c. feems to be of opinion, " that the greatest " part of mankind cannot be in a deplorable " condition for want of a revelation, which "God, out of his infinite wisdom, has not " as yet thought fit to communicate to them; " at least with that evidence as is necessary to " make them believe it *". If it be, because they are capable by their reason of discovering those rules, that are sufficient for their present and future bappiness, which is the substance of what he has advanc'd in the preceding paragraph, 'tis evident that this will not support the principle which he would build upon it. For notwithstanding this, men may be ignorant of some of the most effential branches of natural religion, which without doubt is a very deplorable condition for reasonable beings to be in, if they are brought into it by their own negligence and carelesness.

IT may be faid however, that in this case 'tis not owing to the want of a revelation, but to their not exercifing their rational faculties aright. Granting this, is their state ever the less deplorable? And may not the corruption be so great, and so universal, as that there may be but little probability of their being recover'd out of it without the help of a revelation? which is all that is, or at least that needs to be, contended for. And if a revelation may rectify those disorders, which otherwise are likely to continue, and to be more and more establish'd, and by the continuance of which mankind must be in very unhappy circumstances; may it not be justly faid, that they are in a deplorable condition for want of a revelation? The meaning of which expression is plainly no more than this, that they are in such deplorable circumstances, that they very much want a revelation to let them right; or at most, that 'tis probable they will remain in that deplorable condition, into which they have involved themselves by their negligence and vice, if God does not vouchsafe them that extraordinary favour. And to fuppose the advocates for revelation to mean by a phrase which is fairly capable of another sense, that the want of a revelation is the cause why any are in a deplorable condition, when they constantly ascribe it to other causes, such as the neglect and abuse of reason, prejudice, vicious passions perverting and darkening the understanding, and the like; and only affign

the general ignorance and corruption of the world, which all the refinements of Philosophy either could not or did not reform, as a reason why a revelation was an unspeakable advantage to it; is playing with words, and mere cavilling,

But perhaps the ingenious author may think, that because God requires no more of his creatures, than in proportion to the light and advantages they enjoy; and will make all the allowances, that can be expected from an infinitely wise and merciful governour, to their unhappy circumstances, and the unavoidable prejudices they labour under; and "men" of all religions whatever, if equally sincere, "have the same title to be equally savour'd by him *;" mankind cannot be in deplorable circumstances for want of a revelation. Let us therefore consider the matter a little in this view.

AND I can see no manner of reason to doubt but that 'tis possible men may be sincere, and yet be ignorant of some which we account plain, and which are essential principles of natural religion; that in the Heathen world, some were sincere who practised idolatry; and in Popish countries, many of the common people are very sincere, notwithstanding their ignorance and superstition; or in other words, that their prejudices are, if not invincible,

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^{*} Christianity as old &cc. p. 415.

confidering the manner of their education, their circumstances in the world, the influence of example, custom, and the like; such however, as truly bonest well-meaning men, who defign right, and act right in proportion to their knowledge, may be influenced by. If our author allows this, as he must do, or else be so uncharitable as to condemn all the ignorant idolatrous and fuperstitious people that ever lived in the world, as wilful corrupters of the light of reason, and consequently in a bopeless state; the only question that remains is, whether notwithstanding their fincerity, which will excuse their ignorance, and recommend them to the favour of God, their condition (though not absolutely wretched and miserable upon the whole, which this author knows was never intended by the most rational advocates for revelation) may not be justly styled deplorable? Or in other words, whether, befides its being a thing much to be lamented, that reasonable creatures should reap little or no advantage from their reason in the most important points, and fall into fuch fentiments and practices as are contrary to its plainest dictates, and dishonourable to human nature, it be not attended with fuch real and great inconveniencies, as may render a revelation, that instructs in juster and more useful principles. very advantageous and serviceable to them?

And either this must be admitted, or it can be no advantage at all to mankind to have just apprehensions of the nature and perfections of God

God, rational notions of religion in all its branches, and an exact knowledge of the obligations, and true principles, of morality; but it must be the same thing in all respects as to its influence upon their happiness, provided they are fincere, whether they are governed by enthufiasm, or true piety; whether their minds are improved by their devotion, or debased; whether they practise their entire duty to God and their fellow-creatures, and understand the just measures of both, so as never to suffer them to clash and interfere with each other, or resolve the whole of religion into a blind fenseles superstition, setting it above real and substantial goodness, and the immutable rules of virtue; or in short, whether they are sunk almost down to the level of brutes, or think and act in all cases becoming the dignity of their nature. But will any one take upon him to advance and maintain such a wild paradox as this? Can they espouse it with any consistency, who profess a mighty zeal for the fimplicity and purity of religion, and make loud outeries against the mischievous consequences of *superstition*, and its natural tendency to destroy the perfection and true happiness of mankind? Without doubt, in the opinion of fuch especially, the superstitious in all ages, whether fincere or infincere, must have been in truly deplorable circumstances; and a revelation to dispel their ignorance, and restore to them the original religion of nature, must have been as great a blessing as could be confered upon them.

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THE thing that is apt to lead persons into mistakes in this matter is their imagining, that because " men of all religions whate-" ver, if equally fincere, have the fame title " to be equally favoured by God, they will " be equally rewarded, or enjoy an equal de-" gree of happiness in the future state." Equally rewarded indeed they will be in porportion to the improvements they have made, and the services they have performed; but notwithstanding this, the degrees of their future happiness may be very various and unequal. Nay, I think, in the reason and equity of the thing, it must be so: or in other words, we must distinguish between the reward of mens fincerity which may be equal; and the reward of real useful virtue, and actual fervices, which, at the same time, we have the greatest reason to believe, may be very different. For,

I. Two men may be equally fincere, and yet moral dispositions and habits, benevolent dispositions for instance, may be much stronger and more perfect in one, than in the other. They may be improved in the one by a more large and generous education, a more clear and exact knowledge of his duty, and by just and amiable sentiments of the Deity; and in the other very much obstructed and limited by unhappy prejudices, and the influence of a blind superstition. Nay, salse notions of religion, and conceiving of God as an ill-natur'd, partial,

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tial, arbitrary, or inexorable being (and there are multitudes in the world, of whom, confidering all circumstances, it can hardly be expected that they should form better notions) may corrupt mens sense of morality to a great degree, and make them baughty and infolent, morose, rigid, and unsociable. And where these cases happen, as I make no doubt they do frequently, if moral dispositions are the perfection of human nature, and the only foundation of rational happiness, the capacity for happiness must, in the nature of things, be very different. Stating the matter thus, the different capacity does not depend on bodily organs, as the author of Christianity &c. infinuates *, but on the temper and habit of the mind; which there is no reason to suppose will be altered in the very instant that men enter upon the feparate state; or that those, in whom the growth and improvement of moral dispositions has in this life, by accidental circumstances only, been greatly obstructed, will find themselves all at once possessed of them in the same strength and perfection as others, who, enjoying better opportunities and advantages, have cultivated them to the utmost.

2. Two persons may be equally sincere, and yet the services justly expected from them may be vastly different. The one, in proportion to his larger knowledge and higher advantages, is obliged to be more extensively use-

^{*} P. 417.

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ful, and to exercise more care and labour in doing good. And where the actual services which men are called to perform are very unequal, which may oftentimes subject the one to much greater difficulties and inconveniences than the other, can it be supposed that there will be a perfect equality in the reward? At this rate, there is indeed no reward at all for the most generous services, nor even for the greatest sufferings to promote the good of mankind (in which virtue may be very far from being its own reward) if persons who have done and fuffered nothing will be rewarded in the same degree, merely for their equal fincerity, and because they would probably have behaved in the same manner, if they had been placed in the fame circumstances. This principle therefore is a discouragement to virtuous actions, as well as a reflection upon the wisdom, and justice of the governour of the world. To which we may add, that moral dispositions and habits, as it is the nature of all habits, are improved and strengthned by more frequent opportunities for the exercise of them; and, consequently, the natural capacity for happiness must be enlarged in proportion.

3. As those who have a more complete and distinct knowledge of their duty will, if they fail in it, be more severely punished than others who enjoy less light, and sewer advantages for improving in virtue; as this, I say, is right and sit, and a principle of natural justice;

flice; there can no equal proportion be observed, if upon discharging their duty faithfully, they are not intitled to a bigher reward. Nay, upon the contrary supposition, the less we know, not only of revelation but of natural religion, the better. For if we are sincere, and act up to our light, and to what is required of us in our particular circumstances, be it ever so little, we are sure of the greatest reward; and out of all danger of the additional punishment, that will be inflicted for missimprovement of superior knowledge.

Upon the whole, therefore, a revelation, by instructing men in right notions of religion, and in the whole of their duty, and affording them better opportunities and advantages for cultivating moral dispositions, for greater usefulness in the world, and consequently for obtaining bigher degrees of happiness hereafter, may be of unspeakable use; and the ignorant and superstitious, though they will be accepted of God if they are sincere, may justly be said to be in a deplorable condition for want of it.

In order to represent a revelation as needless our author proceeds farther, and tells us, * that " had God, from time to time, spoke " to all mankind in their several languages, " and his words had miraculously conveyed " the same ideas to all persons; yet he could

^{*} Pag. 27.

" not fpeak more plainly than he has done by " the things themselves, and the relation "which reason sheweth there is between "them." But when men do not attend to the nature of things, the case is very much the same as if God had not spoke to them at all. And a revelation may certainly be very useful to teach them those principles and duties of natural religion, which, notwithstanding it was in their power to have discover'd them, if they had made a right use of their reason, they are in fact grolly ignorant of. If one man endeavours to rectify the mistakes of another in points of morality, must such instructions be impertinent, nay, are they ever the less necessary, because God has spoke the fame truths clearly by the nature of things, though his voice be not heard? A man that does not hear or fee has as much need of instruction, as if he was naturally deaf or blind.

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BESIDES, when God speaks to all mankind, and his words miraculously convey the same ideas to all, this is giving them an actual knowledge of their duty; whereas in the other case, there is, at most, only a capacity to discover it; i. e. they may know it, or they may not; because their knowledge must be entirely the result of their own study, and impartial inquiry. And,

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A STANDING revelation, though men may indeed pervert it, as well as darken the light of reason, and be as ignorant, superstitious, and degenerate, as if it had never been communicated to them; I fay, a standing revelation, if it be free to the use of all, and frequently confulted, must, in the nature of the thing, be a more probable security, with respect to the bulk of mankind, against gross errors and corruptions, than the leaving them altogether to the direction and conduct of their own reason: because it will constantly supply them with proper thoughts, which is what the common people in all ages have most For though the right exercise of wanted. their rational faculties may be fufficient to give them just notions of God, and of the great essential principles of religion; yet this requires more confideration than they generally care for. And experience teaches us, that they make but little of it, when they are left to find out the rules of morality for themselves. Indolence, want of use, and the attention of their minds to the necessary business, and the pleasures of life, hinder their making any great proficiency; and being inclined, to fave themselves the trouble of thinking, to be implicit in their belief, they are eafily practifed upon, and led into the most dangerous and hurtful superstition. All which inconveniences are in a great measure provided against by a standing revelation, which prescribes a plain, intelligible, and complete rule of morals: fo

that if they will but be at the pains to read it carefully, which they will be fooner persuaded to, than to think so much as is neceffary to discover every part of it by their own reason, the meanest may be so well acquainted with the perfections of God, and the nature of true religion, as to guard against the two extremes, of irreligion on the one hand, and enthusiasm and superstition on the other.

AND whereas it is urged farther, that " fince 'tis impossible in any book, or books, " a particular rule could be given for every case, we must even then," i. e. upon the supposition, that God had spoke to all mankind in their several languages, and his words had miraculously conveyed the same ideas to all perfons, " have had recourse to the light of na-" ture to teach us our duty in most cases; " especially considering the numberless cir-" cumstances which attend us, and which, " perpetually varying, may make the fame " actions, according as men are differently " affected by them, either good or bad *:" this amounts to no more, than that all revelation can do for us, is to lay down the general principles and rules of conduct in all circumstances, but that we must consult our reason about the application of these general rules to particular cases; which is granted, but does not, as every one must see, in the least affect the

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present argument. For a man who has the most exact and perfect knowledge of natural religion has only in his mind general principles, and not a particular rule for every circumstance that may happen. These general principles alone are the eternal and immutable law of nature. And therefore, if our knowledge of natural religion, i. e. of the general rules to be observed in our behaviour towards God, and our fellow-creatures, and in governing our affections and appetites, be a great advantage to us, notwithstanding we are obliged to the constant use of our reason, in order to judge, with respect to particular actions, whether or no they agree with these general rules, for instance, whether they are just or unjust, beneficent or hurtful; the knowledge of a revelation that teaches all the same general principles, which for the most part are very eafily accommodated to circumstances, must be an equal advantage. I forbear enlarging, because it would need an apology to spend much time upon such objections.

But the author of Christianity &cc. "thinks "it no compliment to external revelation, "though, as he adds, the learned Dr. Clarke defigned it as the highest, to say it prevailed, when the light of nature was in a manner extinct *." The plain sense of which is, that 'tis no compliment to external revelation,

^{*} P. 381.

to say it was given at a season when it must be most useful, or that God could not wifely and bonourably interpose to reveal his will to mankind, when their notions of natural religion were corrupted and depraved; and consequently that he could never do it at all, fince in any other circumstance of the world a revelation is plainly needless. Let us however confider the weight of the reason which is affigned for this, viz. that " then an irrational " religion might as eafily obtain as a rational " one *." Suppose it might, is that an argument that Christianity is not a rational religion? If it be not, as every one must fee there is not the least shadow of an argument in it, to what purpose is it urged?

The only question that can affect the credit of the Christian revelation is this, whether mankind might not be convinced, upon rational grounds, of its truth and excellency, notwithstanding their general corruption and depravity; and that they had in a great measure lost the knowledge of the true religion of nature? If it be shewn, that in such a degenerate state of the world sufficient evidence might be given, that Christianity was a religion most worthy of God, and calculated to promote the perfection and highest happiness of mankind; of what importance is it to inquire, whether or no it be possible that they might have been prevailed upon to embrace

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an abfurd and irrational religion, if God had permitted evil spirits to work miracles to confirm and establish it? The Christian religion might have been never the less of divine authority, though mens corruptions and vicious prejudices had determined them to reject it; and an irrational religion would not have been at all proved to have proceeded from God, though it had been univerfally received. The truth or falshood of any religion cannot be argued therefore from the opinions which men happen to entertain concerning it, and does not in the least depend upon their prejudices; but is to be judged of only by its own intrinsic wisdom and goodness, and its having the proper external credentials of a divine revelation. And if notwithstanding their ignorance, superstition, and the false notions they have conceived, men may still be convinced that it has all necessary external credentials, and is in every part of it just, wife, and rational; 'tis evident it may prevail bonourably, whatever deceptions we suppose them liable to, even of the most gross and dangerous nature.

Put the case that the world is universally corrupted; that they have not only lost the knowledge of the one true God, and practise the most stupid idolatry, but entertain the most absurd and dishonourable notions of the Gods whom they worship; that they attribute to their Deities the weaknesses and imperactions of human nature; and conceive of

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them as unjust, arbitrary, cruel, and revengeful; pleased and offended with trifles; and prefering the follies and extravagancies of a deluded and fanciful superstition, which debases the dignity of human nature, before folid and real goodness; and that, in consequence of this, their sense of good and evil, and of the principles and obligations of morality, is very much vitiated and darkened, and they are led to look upon religion as a thing absolutely distinct from virtue, and to resolve the whole of it into ridiculous tricks, and idle ceremonies. It will be very bard, if in fuch deplorable circumstances the great God cannot honourably interpose, and by an extraordinary revelation, which without doubt is the most desireable advantage that can be afforded to his degenerate creatures, recover them to right sentiments of their duty and happiness. And it cannot but be the wish of every generous mind, that, if possible, some remedy might be applied to cure so great an evil. Let us consider therefore, whether what every wife and good man must defire might be, may not be.

Now when mankind are funk thus low; when they have in a manner lost the religion of nature; and those principles which they retain somewhat of are so perverted, as to be of very little use to them, and indeed to make it a question, whether they are any thing better than no religion at all; an extraordinary messenger is sent from God, who works very great and unquestionable miracles. These mi-

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that there is something uncommon in this perfon's commission. They both demand and engage their attention to the doctrine he teaches, and counterbalance their prejudices in savour of the superstition in which they were educated; so that they are prevailed upon to examine this new religion with care and impartiality.

MAY not then the doctrines of it, if they are plain, important, and useful, and entirely agreeable to reason, approve themselves to the understandings of rational beings, how corrupt foever their former opinions and principles were? May they not, if they will think, and exercise those intellectual faculties with which God hath endued their nature, come to the knowledge of the one supreme Creator and Governour of all things, and form rational and worthy notions of his perfections and prowidence; and of all the necessary branches of true religion, and morality? May they not be recovered out of their ignorance and fuperstition? Or are the reasonable creatures of God, when they have once corrupted the religion of nature, in a remediless state? Because they may be deluded and imposed upon, and grow worse and worse; is it impossible they should use their reason aright? Because a false religion may easily be obtruded upon them, while they are under the influence of strong prejudices; ought the true religion, of the worth and excellency of which they must be capable of being convinced, if their reason

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be any thing more than an empty name, and which instructs them in the most useful knowledge, and rectifies their moral disorders, to be the less respected? Or because truth and error, if equally recommended by supernatural operations, or by the artful management of a cunning impostor, may equally prevail; does it follow, that the truth cannot be received upon rational evidence; Does this render knowledge and virtue ever the less worthy and bonourable, or ignorance and vice ever the less infamous and burtful? Must we therefore confound and destroy the eternal and immutable differences of things?

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'Tis certainly a very great mistake to suppose, that men cannot judge of the truth and divine authority of any particular revelation, unless they have in their minds, antecedently to its being proposed to their consideration, just and worthy notions of God, and of the great principles and duties of natural re-And yet this fentiment feems to run through our author's whole book. And I expect indeed that it will be asked, how 'tis posfible, in the nature of the thing itself, that we should fet about determining rationally, whether a revelation be worthy of God, if we do not know beforehand what fort of a being God is; and if instead of conceiving of him as immutably wife, just, and good, we form false and dishonourable apprehensions even of his moral character? Or how we can be capable of knowing whether or no it agrees with natural religion,

religion, if, before we begin to examine it, we do not throughly understand what natural religion means? And, on the other hand, it may be said, that if we have already formed right and becoming conceptions of the perfections of the Deity, and believe what the religion of nature teaches concerning our duty to God and our fellow-creatures, and the necessary means in order to obtain the perfection and happiness of our reasonable nature, without which we cannot judge that any particular scheme of reveal'd religion is sit to be received and submitted to, a revelation must be superstuous and needless.

I ANSWER, that the faculty of reason which God hath implanted in mankind, however it may have been neglected and abused in times past, will, whenever they begin to exercise it aright, enable them to judge of all these things. As by means of this, they were capable of discovering at first the being and perfections of God, and that he governs the world with absolute wisdom, equity, and goodness, and what those duties are which they owe to him, and to one another; they must be as capable, if they will divest themfelves of prejudice, and reason impartially, of rectifying any mistakes which they may have fallen into about these important points. Their noble powers of thinking and reflecting, if they can enable them to find out truth, must be fufficient, if they make a right use of them, to recover them from error. It matters not whether

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whether theyhave hitherto thought right or wrong, nor indeed whether they have thought at all; let them but begin to confider ferioufly, and examine carefully and impartially, and they must be able to find out all those truths, which as reasonable creatures they are capable of knowing, and which necessarily affect their duty and happiness. They will soon come to form just notions in general of a religion that is worthy of God; and consequently be fit to judge, whether any particular revelation be worthy of him. And to fuppose otherwise, is only to make reason serviceable in forming our first sentiments about religion: but if we pervert it, and fet out wrong, our errors are incurable; and this most excellent and distinguishing gift of the great Creator, which is the highest mark of our dignity above the mere animal world, is render'd for ever useless.

THE persons who are in this way of thinking feem to have but confus'd ideas, when they speak of mankind as reasonable creatures, capable of differening the differences of things; and this makes them talk inconfistently about it. For instance, when reason is to be magnified in order to represent a revelation as needless, then it can do mighty things; it is fufficient to teach men all the principles of natural religion, and the whole of their duty; nay, tho it has been ever so much corrupted and darkened, and men are become ever so ignorant, enthufiastical, and superstitious,

it is fill in their power, by the right use of their natural faculties, to discover all abuses, to rectify all their errors, and attain to just and rational notions of religion. But at other times, the quite contrary is maintained with a view to the same end, to discredit and run down revelation, viz. that the mere capacity of reafoning does not qualify men to judge whether a religion be rational, and worthy of God; but they must actually have in their minds, before they fet themselves to consider and determine this point, right conceptions of God, and of the laws of reason by which revelation is to be tried. This shifting of principles, as the exigency of the case requires, plainly shews, that the greatest pretenders to reason are not entirely to be depended upon,

'Tis almost needless, after such concessions of our adversaries, however they may upon other occasions contradict themselves, and after what has been argued already from the nature of the thing itself, to add any thing more upon this head; I shall, notwithstanding, pursue the matter a little farther. And in my opinion 'tis so far from being necessary, in order to our judging rationally of the truth and goodness of a revelation, that we come to the inquiry with just fentiments of God, and of the general nature of true religion; that I very much question whether an atheist may not, by means of it, be convinced even of the being of a God. For tho' a person of this charac-

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character, having now only the bistory of certain extraordinary and wonderful works performed in confirmation of the Christian religion, may laugh at the doctrine of miracles, and look upon the belief of them as ignorant and enthusiastic credulity; yet I believe, if we consider how much more strongly human nature is wrought upon by sensible proofs, than by a traditional account of things, we shall make no difficulty of allowing, that 'tis very possible, if he had this evidence, he might entertain quite different thoughts of them.

LET us suppose then, that he actually faw very great miracles wrought; that he had opportunities of examining them carefully; and that he was fully convinced upon the most diligent fearch, that they were above all the known powers of nature, and contrary to the established course of things, and consequently was fure, not only that they were not juggling tricks, but that he was not imposed on by one who knew better than himself the secret and invifible operations of natural causes: suppose, for example, that he saw a person whom he knew to be dead, and who had been buried several days, restored to life again, and converfed with him for a confiderable time together; or heard others, whom he knew to be wholly illiterate, speak all of a fudden, easily, and stuently, various languages. I will not take upon me to fay, that these things are impossible to be accounted for, if there be not an infinite mind, the Creator and Governour of the uni-

verse, or consequently, that they are, strictly speaking, a demonstration of the existence of a Deity; but may they not have this effect upon him, to make him grave and considerate? May he not conclude, upon feeing fuch extraordinary appearances, that 'tis at least worth his while to think a little, whether there be a God, and whether there be any thing in religion, or no? The furprize and awe, with which men are naturally ftruck at fuch great and unexpected events, has a tendency to correct the levity of their minds. which leads to an utter dissipation of thought, and consequently to scepticism and infidelity in points of the greatest moment. And when they grow ferious, and begin to reason coolly and deliberately, there is no danger of their continuing Atheists long: the existence of a supreme and infinite Being, who made and governs the world, being one of the first truths the human understanding discovers, and the evidences of it plain, and level to all capacities. And a little impartial reflection will bring men as eafily to form right and honourable conceptions of God, especially with respect to his moral perfections; and consequently teach them what scheme of religion is most worthy of, and acceptable to him.

And indeed the truth of all this is necessarily supposed by every attempt that is made by wise and rational men, who do not pretend to a particular commission from heaven, to reform the

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tly errors and vices of the world. The author of Christianity &c. for instance, lamenting of ect the ignorance and superstition in which a great part of mankind are involved, their unworerich thy notions of God, which tend to taint and aft deprave their minds, and gross corruptions of ner natural religion and morality, in the regular practice of which, both the happiness of priiny vate persons, and of civil societies, is so nearly ind ick concerned, has wrote a large book, to recover them from their enthufiasm and delusion to a raenids, tional piety and virtue. And must they not, in order to receive any benefit from so kind and tht, in generous a defign, be capable of judging of every part of it? Must they not be able to nen discern, whether the religion he recommends olly is worthy of God? But how shall they come to neir of a know this? If while they conceive of the Divine Being as capricious and humoursome, arand first bitrary and tyrannical, unjust and cruel, and of and religion as a thing that confifts in trifling ceremonies, and unintelligible mysteries, and not cawill in the right government of the passions, and the plain and useful duties of a good life, they onvith make these false opinions the standard and rule of their judgement; it is impossible niegion they should rectify their mistakes. And is there no way in which they can be brought to think more justly? Without doubt there is, irily and must be : otherwise, the endeavours of this author and of all others, to instruct the igwife norant and superstitious, are wild and fantajo a tical. And what else can it be, but the right the use of those powers which God hath given

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them, to distinguish between truth and falshood; and especially to discover moral truths. and the principles of natural religion, which are of the utmost consequence to their happiness? As therefore I apprehend, that the author of Christianity &c. would have just reafon to complain, if any should say, "that it was no compliment" to his book to suppose, that the principles contained in it, however true and rational, prevailed amongst those who had grofly corrupted the great truths and duties of natural religion, and confequently in whom "the light of nature was in a manner extinct," i. e. amongst those, with a view to whose advantage chiefly it was wrote; I cannot but think, that there is equal ground of complaint, whether of inadvertency, or difingenuity, when the same thing is said, upon the very same account, concerning the Christian revelation.

The ingenious author will forgive me if I add farther, that an external revelation seems much better calculated to reform the world in such degenerate circumstances, than the most judicious and accurate labours of any private man whatsoever; for the most excellent buman composures may be neglected, or read with carelessness and partiality, for want of some previous recommendation, that is sufficient to bear down mens prejudices in favour of a contrary scheme. But miracles bespeak their attention so strongly to the doctrines of revelation, that they set themselves to examine them

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them as points of great importance, which they are, in a particular manner, called upon to consider. And thus they may easily learn those truths by means of a revelation, which otherwise, through indolence preventing free and impartial consideration; or superstition, a regard to tradition, custom, and the like, perverting and darkening their minds, they might always have continued ignorant of: even the plainest and most useful truths, which they may be binder'd from discovering by the causes above-mention'd, or others of a like nature; but which, when they are inquired into with ingenuity and candour, soon gain the asserted fent of the understanding.

ISHALL conclude this chapter with a more particular confideration of the use of miracles, in answer to this question, bow far they are an evidence of the truth of any religion, and that the person who teaches it is sent by God? And in my opinion, 'tis not rational to suppose, that miracles alone, and apart from all other confiderations, are an absolute and decilive proof of the truth and divinity of any revelation, but confider'd with ALL their circumstances; either as they attest a wife and holy doctrine, a doctrine worthy of God, calculated to promote the moral pefection and happiness of mankind, and wisely suited to the condition and necessities of those, whose use it is particularly designed: or else, as they are friendly and beneficent miracles, and bear upon them the strongest characters of wi/dom

wisdom and goodness, as well as power; and confequently cannot, without the utmost absurdity, and most manifest contradiction to the nature of things, be look'd upon as the operations of evil spirits. For,

I. It cannot, I think, be disputed, that superior created beings may be capable of performing real miracles; or in other words, that they may enable a man to do such things as are above the ordinary powers of human nature, and produce effects by an invisible operation, which vastly exceed the natural agency of the immediate and visible instruments. Again,

II, As we know not what degrees of power fuch fuperior beings may be possessed of, nor confequently the utmost they are capable of performing, we can have no certain, nor even probable rule, in most cases at least, whereby to distinguish what operations are properly Divine, and what are not fo. We cannot from the effects themselves conclude that they are wrought by God, because we are not able to shew that they are above the powers which he has given to other beings; fo that the making miracles the fole proof of a divine revelation, of which, by themselves, they can be no proof at all, unless we have a probability at least, that they surpass the skill and agency of all created beings, must render their evidence very uncertain and doubtful. Especially if we consider farther,

III.

III. THAT as invisible beings, superior in power to mankind, may perform real miracles, and fuch as are of the most astonishing and stupendous kind; we are not fure that God may not, for wife reasons, permit this. As the great Creator has fix'd general rules, the wifest and best that could be, for the government of the natural and moral world, tis not likely that he will let any of his creatures alter those rules at pleasure, just as it may fuit their bumour, or malicious purposes, and whenever they have a mind to amuse, astonish, or deceive those, who are more ignorant and weak than themselves. But shall we prefume to fay, that he can never allow any thing of this kind, upon any occasion whatever? This we cannot take upon us to affert, without knowing all the possible ends that may be ferved by fuch permissions, which, I think, is much more than we can modeftly pretend to.

INDEED, we are certain of this from the moral perfections of the Supreme Being, that he will never fuffer the bonest and impartial to be necessarily deceiv'd, to their detriment and prejudice. But tho this is a necessary exception; and may perhaps include in it a great variety of cases; it deserves to be consider'd in general, that the bonest and impartial cannot be thus deceived, if they are not determined by miracles alone to give their affent to any doctrine as a Divine revelation, but by the reafonableness E 2

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fonableness and intrinsic excellence of the doctrine itself in conjunction with miracles. And moreover, that there are some supposeable cases in which, if the reason of mankind be exercised in the lowest degree that can be expected from moral and accountable creatures, it will be a fure and constant preservative from all dangerous errors. For instance, if a person pretends to bring a revelation from heaven, that directly recommends and encourages intemperance, injustice, and cruelty, and fuch like most notorious and hurtful immoralities; I cannot fee how any common man, who makes the least use of that understanding which God hath given him, can be prevail'd upon to embrace a scheme so destructive of the plainest obligations of virtue, and of the peace and happiness of the world, by ten thousand miracles. He has in his power eafily to detect the falshood of all such doctrines, how pompoully foever they are supported. For his reason must inform him, unless he is so stupid as to destroy his accountableness, or so indolent and careless as is inconfistent with fincerity, that no miracles can prove that to be true, which calls darkness light, and entirely confounds the necessary and immutable difference of moral good and evil; and he must immediately be convinced, if he will allow himself any time for cool reflection, that fuch miraculous effects ought not to be ascribed to the power of God. whose nature is the most perfect and invariable reason, and who cannot contradict himfelf,

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felf, nor give the least encouragement to vice and impurity. So that if in such plain cases, reasonable creatures, who have an easy and infallible rule to go by, and of whom, if any thing can be expected, it may justly be required that they should discover the fraud, will notwithstanding suffer themselves to be deceived, they alone must answer for the consequences: and it can no more be inconsistent with the absolute perfection of the great Governour of the world to permit this, than 'tis for him to permit any other instance of moral evil.

FROM what has been said it appears, that miracles alone do not prove the truth of any religion; because we cannot pretend to say of any miraculous effects, at least not of most of the miracles which are recorded in the old and new testament, that they are performable by God only; or that the Divine Being may not, upon some occasions, permit superior invisible beings to work very great and astonishing miracles; provided he has put it in the power of every bonest and impartial inquirer to avoid being seduced by them into any errors, that are dangerous to his virtue and happiness.

In truth, miracles, abstractly consider'd, are only a demonstration of a superior power: but whether they are performed by a wife, just, and benevolent agent, whether they are the immediate effects of his power who is

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the best, as well as the greatest, of beings; or, which comes to the fame, wrought by beings commission'd by him; can only be known by the beneficial effects of them, and by the nature, tendency, and use of the doctrines, which they are defigned to confirm. Let us illustrate this matter a little farther by an instance, by which we shall see, that what has been urged as the reason of the thing will, upon a proper trial, be the conduct of every thinking and rational man. Would any person, if a pretended revelation was brought him in a book that he was not admitted to look into, or know any thing of the contents of, venture upon it in the dark, and promise absolutely to embrace it, and regulate his conduct by it, even though the pretender was enabled to perform real miracles? Such a behaviour would show the forwardness of his faith, or rather an easy credulity; but fure I am, it could be no proof that his faith was wife and rational. For if the doctrines which this book contains should prove to be unworthy of God, and repugnant to reason and virtue (which is a very supposeable circumstance, the scripture itself allowing, that false prophets may work miracles for the support of an imposture), a man must be ashamed of having made so basty a conclufion, or abandon all pretentions to understanding and fincerity. If when he comes to examine it, he finds in it fuch positions as these, that God is not to be reverenced, served, and worshipped by his creatures; that men are at liberty to indulge themselves in all the irregulari-

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ties of their sensual appetites; that they may bate, persecute, and destroy one another for religious differences; if, I fay, it contains such principles as these, or any one of them, ought he not to reject it with abhorrence, as having much fronger, and more certain, evidence, that fuch doctrines are false and absurd, than he can have that any miracles whatever, confider'd in themselves, are Divine? And must not then that faith be enthusiastical, and rife valtly higher than the evidence which is the ground and foundation of it, that receives doctrines absolutely, and without deliberating at all about them, upon the testimony of miracles alone? Is it not directly contrary to the nature of true religion, which encourages the utmost freedom of inquiry into all its principles? Or can any thing give more folid suspicion of fraud and knavish defign, than the restraining this liberty, which is the most valuable privilege of our intelligent nature, and, indeed, without which, our reason is quite insignificant and useless?

But though miracles cannot alter the nature of things, prove falshood to be truth, virtue to be vice, or vice virtue; yet when the doctrines they attest are all agreeable to reason, and upon the whole bonourable to almighty God, and useful and beneficial to mankind; when they give us the justest notions of his infinite perfections, and of the wisdom and goodness of his moral providence, and are fuited to the circumstances and necessities of those E 4

those to whom the revelation is made; they must be allowed to have the greatest weight, and to be sufficient and substantial proofs that a religion, which in its whole frame and defign appears to be worthy of God, is really derived from him. For 'tis certainly agreeable to our most perfect apprehensions of the Deity to suppose, that such a doctrine as this is his peculiar care; that he should give it the strongest credentials, and impress the stamp of his authority upon it; a doctrine that represents his own nature, and essential attributes, in the most amiable and glorious light, and is of the bighelt advantage to his creatures: and its being so worthy, that God should interpose in an extraordinary way to recommend and enforce it, is a very just prefumption, that the miracles which bear testimony to it are the effects of his wisdom and power; or at least, if they are the operations of other beings, that they are done by authority from him.

This argument will appear to be of very great force, if we confider farther, that in any other view of the case it is not to be accounted for. For 'tis utterly improbable, that evil spirits, if they might be permitted to perform such wonderful works, would exert themselves in the defense of true piety and virtue; and counteract all those measures, by which alone the kingdom of darkness and iniquity is, or can be, supported. The reasoning of Christ upon this head is unanswerable: Every king-

^{*} Mat. xii. 25, 26.

this. For if such great miracles as those recorded in the new testament, for instance, may, by Divine permission, be wrought by created beings, to confirm the truth of a doctrine that is upon the whole worthy of God, or, in other words, which, for any thing that appears from reason to the contrary, may be of divine original; (as we cannot conceive of any miracles, which, if these are all possible, may rationally be judged impossible to a created agency) it will not be in the power of God himself to make a revelation, and by certain credentials, i. e. fuch credentials as may be distinguished from the credentials that other beings may give, demonstrate the truth of it to the world. But this is a supposition so abfurd, that it cannot be admitted ever to happen in the course of his moral government; because if we should grant that an external revelation has in all ages of the world bitherto been needless, 'tis possible however, that some time bereafter the circumstances of mankind may be fuch, that it may be of the highest advantage to them, and, consequently, that the wisdom and goodness of God may incline him to communicate it.

I EXPECT it will be objected, that if the foregoing account be true, miracles are of no use. For it may be said, they are allowed to be proofs of a Divine revelation no farther, than as the doctrine they bear testimony to is worthy of God; and if the doctrine be rational and good, they are altogether super-fluous,

fluous, because it will recommend itself without them, by its own intrinsic excellency, to the unprejudiced reason and judgment of mankind. To this I shall endeavour to give a full and distinct answer. And,

I. I OBSERVE, that miracles are very proper to engage the attention of men even to moral doctrines. 'Tis indeed true, that thefe, being all principles and dictates of reason, may prevail by the force of their own evidence, without any external recommendation; but 'tis as true, that if men will not confider and examine impartially, they will never (fo plain, important, and useful as they are) make their way in the world. Now this serious confideration, and deliberate unbiaffed inquiry even about the principles of natural religion, may in some circumstances be very unlikely to happen, in opposition to the strong prejudices of education, to custom, general opinion, interest, and other motives, which have the most powerful influence upon mankind, without fomething to awaken and alarm the mind. Especially if we add, what universal experience testifies, that prejudices of a religious kind, being of all others the most facred and venerable, take the fastest hold of us, and are with the utmost difficulty eradicated. If a man, without any thing uncommon and firiking to introduce his attempt of reforming the world, had applied himself either to the Jews or Gentiles, at the time of our Saviour's appearance; to restore natural religion amongst the

the former to its original purity, when it was very much corrupted and depraved; or to rescue the latter from their superstition and idolatry; he would probably have been looked upon as an impertinent, pragmatical, bufy fellow at least, if not punished as a profane irreligious person, and a disturber of the public peace. But miracles would at least gain him an audience, and not only convince wife men that his pretentions had fomewhat extraordinary in them, and were worthy to be examin'd, but perhaps rouse the indolent and vicious. And if they served only to balance mens prejudices, and excite them to an bonest impartial inquiry, they must certainly be of excellent use; because the mind being thus free and disengaged, and put upon considering, a doctrine that was in itself rational and good could scarce fail of an bonourable reception; and of being heartily embraced and fubmitted to. But farther,

2. A L L the parts of a pretended revelation may be worthy of God, and yet the reafonableness and truth of them may not be alike evident in themselves. For besides moral precepts, and plain unquestionable natural principles, it may contain others, that upon the foot of mere reason are uncertain and doubtful, but yet, if firmly establish'd, would be very strong motives to virtue; of which kind, I take the doctrine of the eternity of suture rewards to be. And besides, there may be in it some doctrines that reason alone could discover nothing of; and certain positive institutions too,

as will be hereafter shewn, useful indeed, either in particular circumstances, or in general, as being fubservient to the great purposes of morality; but the obligation of which does not arife from the nature of the things themselves, but must be resolved into the will of the supreme governour and lawgiver. And fuch doctrines and precepts as these, against which no objection of any weight can be raifed, to shew that they are unworthy of God to reveal or enjoin; especially if they belong to a revelation, that, in the whole scheme and design of it, is most excellent, and completely adapted to promote true goodness; miracles must prove to be actually of Divine original. So that they anfwer these two great uses, among others perhaps that might be mentioned, viz. to engage the attention to moral doctrines, and the principles of natural religion, which, when confidered, will foon approve themselves to the rational judgment of mens minds; and to give a fanction to others, which though agreeable to, are not demonstrable by, natural reason. They are a good evidence, that what reason informs us may be true is really true; that a revelation, which, for any thing that appears to the contrary, is worthy of God, proceeds directly from him; and make that, which to reason is obscure and doubtful, clear and certain.

This is all that I think it necessary to offer, concerning the use and evidence of miracles in general: a particular defense of the credibility of the miracles related in the gospelbistory will be attempted in the third chapter.

CHAP. II.

Vindicating the conduct of providence in not making the Christian revelation universally known; and prowing that this is consistent with the perfections of God, and consequently with the notion of its being a Divine revelation.

T will be asked, if a revelation was of fuch great use to mankind, as it is reprefented to be in the preceding chapter; why was it not given fooner? why not communicated to ALL? and why is it not renewed, as often as gross ignorance and a corruption of natural religion prevail? The author of Christianity &c. puts the question differently thus; " Is it not incumbent on those, who " make any external revelation fo necessary " to the happiness of all mankind, to shew " how it is confistent with the notion of God's " being univerfally benevolent, not to have " reveal'd it to all his children, when all had " equal need of it *?" After which he adds feveral other questions that might very well have been spared, because it will be allowed him, that it " was as easy for God to have " communicated a revelation to all nations,

" as to any one nation, or person; or in all " languages, as in any one; nay, that be " could have made all men, for the fake " of this noble end, speak in one and the " fame language, and that God cannot have " any need at all of language, to let man-" kind know his will *." These things, I fay, needed not to have been mentioned, because they are quite foreign to the present argument: the matter in debate being only this, whether it be confistent with the wisdom and justice of God as the moral governour of mankind, and with his universal benevolence to his creatures and fubjects, to bestow upon some the great advantage of a particular revelation, and deny it to others? I shall endeayour to give a full folution of this difficulty, in which the adversaries of revelation seem to triumph as unanswerable. In order to which I observe,

THAT was a revelation absolutely necesfary, to enable mankind to know and practise what it is their duty to know and practise; was it, I say, in the nature of the thing itself absolutely necessary, to enable men, as men, to know and practise their duty; we might fairly conclude from the justice, as well as the wisdom and goodness, of God, that he would afford it to ALL. But this is not the case; the infinitely wise governour of the world requiring nothing of his crea-

tures, but what he has given them a capacity to perform; the natural consequence of which is, that every man does his duty, and answers the end of that particular station in which he is placed, who acts up to the light and advantages he enjoys, whatever they are. And upon any other principle besides this of the absolute necessity of a revelation as above explained, 'tis, I conceive, impossible for us to prove, that God is obliged to give a revelation at all, let mankind be ever fo ignorant, and fallen into ever so corrupt and degenerate a state. The utmost we can say is, that it would be agreeable to our notions of his most perfect goodness, and therefore we might perhaps be tempted to hope for it; but as there are infinite things of this kind, which we are apt to imagine, would be of great advantage to particular parts of the creation, and yet are not granted to them, it must be presumption and conjecture only, and could not amount to a probability.

THE great God establish'd at first such a course and order of things with respect to mankind, as was most worthy his infinite wisdom and goodness. He made them rational and free creatures; the necessary result of which is, that they are capable of neglecting and darkening, as well as of exercising and improving, that reason, which he implanted in them to be the rule of their actions. Suppose then, that by an abuse of their natural liberty, they had involved themselves in deplorable ignorance of the plainest principles of morality.

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morality. Nay, let us suppose, not only that the most absurd superstition and the grossest corruptions of true piety and virtue had been, for many ages, the establish'd religion of a great part of the world; but that the common people, having none to instruct them better, and being strongly prepossessed in favour of the fuperstition in which they were educated, and taught that it was the greatest impiety to doubt of the facredness and Divine authority of any part of it, and never meeting with any thing to put them upon thinking, and rouze them out of their indolence and stupidity, were under the power of almost invincible prejudices; and so ignorant even of moral obligations, that they practifed none of them upon the true principles of virtue, but only as conveniencies in outward life, and from a kind of instinct like that in brute creatures, and consequently no more deserving the name of religion than some actions of mere animals. Supposing this, I say, to be the case, whether it has ever actually happen'd in all the degrees of it or no, though, I believe, most mens observation will furnish them with some examples very like it; will it follow, because they are funk so low as to be but very little above brutes, so that it may justly be question'd, whether they deserve the character of moral agents, or not, (which may be owing more to the unhappy circumstances in which providence has placed them, than to any wilful fault of their own) that God is obliged by a reodw andrea or di F. colletavat a velation

velation to rectify these disorders? I think far from it. For the original constitution, notwithstanding these accidental defects, was, upon the whole, wife and good; and the great author of nature is no more oblig'd to interpose in an extraordinary way, to alter and amend in fuch cases as these, than in any other instance of natural evil. We see in fact, that there are in the human species many downright ideots, who, very probably, were it not for some accidental defect in the bodily organs, might think and reason as well as other men. And certainly it must be as consistent with the wisdom and goodness of God to suffer others to live in fuch circumstances, that they may be almost as ignorant of good and evil, at least as far as rational religion and morality is concern'd, as ideots, or brutes; and he cannot, strictly speaking, be oblig'd to redress the one case any more than the other. Nor is it necessary to suppose, if we allow this, that the faculty of reason which he hath given them will be quite lost; because they may bereafter be placed in better circumstances, in which their reason shall have a larger scope, without any of those difficulties which now encumber and oppress it. And in the mean while, notwithstanding all the disadvantages they labour under, their happiness, even in this life, may be much greater than their misery. And,

Ir it cannot be proved that God is obliged to give a revelation even to persons who have

in a manner quite lost all the advantage of their rational faculties, or to take any extraordinary measures for their recovery; much less can we affert this, when a revelation is only wanted to enable them to attain the
bigbest degrees of that happiness, of which their nature may in itself be capable; and
consequently, though it cannot be denied,
that when the world is over-run with ignorance and superstition, a revelation is extremely desireable, and might be highly useful,
this is no argument at all that God is necessarily oblig'd to communicate it, though it be a
reason why be may.

To apply what has been faid to the point we are now confidering. If God is not obliged to give a revelation at all, provided it be not absolutely necessary to enable men, as men, to know and practise their duty, or what he indispensably requires of them, notwithstanding it would be a great advantage to them; the mere consideration of its usefulness, and of their being in deplorable circumstances for want of it, can be no argument that as a wife, just, and infinitely benevolent Being, he must make it universal: because what does not prove that he is under an obligation to grant it to ANY, can never prove that he is bound to afford it to ALI.. The whole of the controversy therefore is brought within a very narrow compass, and turns upon this fingle question; whether, what God is not obliged to vouchfafe to any, he may not com-F 2 municate

municate to some, exclusively of the rest; or, in other words, whether he may not bestow his favours upon whom he pleases, and in cases in which right, and strict justice are not at all concern'd, make a difference between his creatures very much to the advantage of some above others, consistently with the most perfect wisdom and goodness? Let any man try whether he can make more of it; and whether, if he will not allow that the Divine Being may act thus, he must not suppose, that he is oblig'd to treat ALL exactly in the same manner, and to communicate to ALL precisely equal degrees of moral perfection, and equal capacities for happiness.

The late most excellent and learned Dr. Clarke had observed very judiciously, that "as God was not obliged to make all his creatures equal, or to make men angels, or to endow all men with the same campacities and faculties; so he was not bound to make all men capable of the fame degree, or the same kind of happiness; or to afford all men the very same means and opportunities of obtaining it ?" But this the author of Christianity &c. thinks not to be a sufficient solution of the difficulty. And therefore though he owns, that "infiinite variety of creatures, and consequently inequality, is necessary to shew the great

[†] Sermons at Boyle's Lecture, 7th edit. p. 317.

"extent of the divine goodness, which plain"ly appears from the beautiful, and well
formed system of the world, and the due
fubordination of things, all contrived for
the happiness of the whole;" he adds "yet
fure, it does not from thence follow, that
God will not either here, or hereafter, beflow on the rational creation all the happiness their nature is capable of; since that
was the end why God gave it them *." Let
us see whether there is any thing in this,
which I think is somewhat obscurely express'd,
that will destroy the force of the learned Dr's
reasoning. And,

IF this writer means no more, by God's bestowing on the rational creation, and particularly on mankind, all the happiness their nature is capable of, than this, that all who are fincere will find favour with God, and be rewarded by him in proportion to their improvements, whether the enjoy the advantage of a revelation, or not; or, as he himself expresses it at the lower end of the same page, in the language of scripture, that men are accepted according to what they have, and not according to what they have not: this is true, but I believe it will be judged to be very little to the purpose; because every part of it may be allowed, and yet men may be possessed in this life, the state of their trial, of different capacities, and advantages for obtaining happiness, and

confequently be rewarded with proportionably different and unequal degrees of happiness hereafter. And fince the ingenious author himself allows, that God, for the greater difplay of his goodness, has very wifely created diffinct orders of intelligent beings, one above another, and confedently that there is a very great inequality between the several parts of the moral creation: fo that even in his opinion it is not, in the nature of the thing itself, inconfistent with his perfect wisdom, and universal unlimited benevolence, to make at least as great a difference between his creatures, as can be supposed to be between such of mankind as enjoy the light of revelation, and others, who, for want of it, are overwhelmed with the groffest ignorance and superstition; this latter case must be entirely agreeable to the wisest exercise of his moral attributes in the government of the world, if there are not some circumstances, peculiar to it, that make it otherwise; i. e. unless it be inconsistent with the perfections of God to make fuch a difference among beings called by one general name, and partaking of the same common nature, and not to afford all of them equal advantages for obtaining the highest degrees of that happiness, of which their rational nature is in itfelf capable. If this be our author's fense, as perhaps it may, and not that already mentioned, I would ask, how is it proved,? Nay, how is it possible it should be proved, if the prefent constitution of things be upon the whole wife and good (which may fairly be taken for granted in arguing with persons, who acknowledge

Christian revelation defended. 71 knowledge all the principles of natural religion) when 'tis undeniably false in fact?

LET any one of common observation, and knowledge of the world, give himself a little time to confider, and he will find, that men have not only vastly different capacities for discovering the obligations of true religion and morality in their utmost extent, but that their opportunities and advantages are very different. Some not only enjoy greater strength of reason, but are much more likely, if their faculties were but equal, confidering the circumstances in which they are placed, to form right notions about these important points, than others. And if the rectitude of human nature confifts in the practice of virtue, do not fuch enjoy better means and more favourable opportunities for pursuing their supreme rational perfection and happiness, than those, whose knowledge, and consequently their practice, of natural religion and morality is corrupted and deprav'd by falle and diffeonourable notions of God, and by a low and extravagant superstition? And has it not been shewn, that as they are enabled by their superior advantages to make greater improvements, more completely to answer the end of their rational being, and to do more real good in the world; and as their larger knowledge, and being furnish'd with clearer and stronger motives, require from them a more difficult and extensive service; 'tis most suitable to the divine wisdom and justice to suppose, that

they will be rewarded with bigher degrees of happiness: and, that if we suppose the contrary, confidering that if they do not improve more, and act better, than others, they will be more severely punish'd, their just sentiments of natural religion, in all the parts of it, must be a misfortune rather than an advantage, and happy are the blind and ignorant? 'Tis plain from hence, that God did not defign all mankind, tho of the same species of beings, for equal degrees of happiness; because they have not the same capacities, nor the same advantages, nor an equal probability of obtaining the bighest, that their rational nature may be capable of. And why may not the great Governour of the world make the same, or a greater, difference (for I apprehend 'tis impossible for us to fix the precise bounds beyond which he cannot proceed) why may he not, I say, make the same difference between mankind by a particular revelation, granting it to some, and denying it to others, as is most visibly and constantly made in the common course of his providence?

The difficulty appears to me to be exactly equal upon the foot of natural religion, as upon the supposition of a revelation. If it be said, that all who are equally sincere, and whose natural capacities are equal, will be equally happy upon the whole, whatever the difference of their particular improvements and services may be, this, I think, has been proved to be false upon both suppositi-

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ons; and that they will be rewarded in proportion to their improvements, and fo far in an equality, may be as true, if there be a revelation, as if men were left entirely to the religion of nature. If it be urged farther, that a revelation vouchsafed only to some parts of the world implies, that the great creator has not afforded to all his rational creatures, of the same rank, equal advantages for obtaining that happiness their reasonable nature is capable of, which is inconfistent with his impartial justice, and universal goodness: I answer, why then has he not done it in the establish'd disposition and order of things? There is evidently a great inequality amongst mankind in this respect, which, upon the scheme of our adversaries, cannot be occasion'd by a revelation, but arises from the difference of their natural capacities, and the variety of their circumstances. And as this difference of natural capacities is the express will of the great Creator, and entirely owing to him; and this variety of circumstances, and the influence it has upon opinions and practices, refults from the original constitution of things, that was fixed by his wisdom and power, and consequently was foreseen and design'd by him; he is as much accountable for the difference that is made between men in a natural way, as for any that is made by an extraordinary interposition: and what will defend the one must fully and effectually vindicate the other. For we must limit the infinite wisdom of God much more than is becoming beings of fuch weak and narrow understandings, if

we prefume to fay, that it cannot be proper for him to make that difference between his creatures in an extraordinary way, which he does make in the general standing course of nature; and all objections against such a method of proceeding, which are only defigned to ruin the credit of a revelation that is not univerfal, i.e. in short, to prove that God never gave a revelation to mankind, and are mightily applauded, upon the account of their supposed strength to gain this favourite point; in truth, strike at the perfections and providence of God, and undermine the foundation of natural religion itself. And 'tis to be hoped, that the persons who make use of them will confider this, and urge them with more caution and modesty at least, if they have really such a high veneration of the religion of nature, as they would have the world believe.

I EXPECT it will still be ask'd, whether, in what view foever we confider a revelation, be it either as absolutely necessary, or only as very useful to mankind, the same reasons which could induce the divine Being to give it to ANY, will not hold as strong for vouchfafing it to ALL? I answer no: And, I think, I have evidently proved the contrary, by shewing that he may, consistently with his perfections, afford a revelation to some nations, and not to others; and that this is conformable to the operations of his providence in other cases. It may as well be ask'd, whether, if there was any reason for his form-

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ing beings of fuperior intelligence and perfection in the moral world, that reason must not be equally good for his making ALL his rational creatures of the highest order? The queftions are exactly parallel, and the very fame answer will serve for both. In each case it may be urged with equal strength, that the thing contended for is the communication of a greater good, and confequently most worthy his perfect goodness; that ALL are his creatures, and upon that account 'tis most worthy his universal and impartial goodness. Or, if it should be said in behalf of the one, that " variety of creatures, and consequently " inequality, is necessary to shew the great " extent of the divine goodness, which plainly " appears from the beautiful and well-form'd " fystem of the world, and the due subordi-" nation of things, all contrived for the hap-" piness of the whole;" I see no reason why we may not fay the fame in vindication of the other: fince the wisdom, and greater goodness, of God may, for any thing we can prove to the contrary, be as much display'd in a variety, and confequently inequality, among beings of the same species (all whose natural capacities do not in fact appear to be the same, though they go by one name, and are of the same compound frame) as in a variety of creatures of different orders. And if God is not obliged absolutely, and in general, to afford all his creatures equal capacities and advantages for happiness, he cannot be bound to it, merely because they belong to one particular species.

species. For can that alone give them a claim to any thing, which they have no ground to expect as the reasonable creatures of God, and from his essential wisdom and goodness?

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But if any should inquire farther, what the particular reasons were, which inclined the Divine being to grant a revelation to some parts of the world, exclusively of others? I chuse rather to confess my ignorance of what I do not understand, than to pretend to be able to affign them. Thus much however may be faid in general, that 'tis very probable they are of the same kind with those, that determin'd him to appoint such a variety, as it is confess'd there is in the rational creation. I may add, that though it be allowed, that the All-perfect Being does not make his mere will the rule of his actions, but the fitness and propriety of things; and consequently that he never acts arbitrarily, or without a reason; it does by no means follow, that his creatures must necessarily see the reasons of his conduct in every instance; or that they have a right to censure whatever they cannot distinctly account for. Far from it. For the way that we come to know that God is not an arbitrary being is not by feeing that there is a reason in all his actions, which is vastly more than the wifest of mortals can pretend to, who are ignorant of the defign and uses of innumerable things, in the constitution of nature, and the course of providence; but we conclude from those surprizing marks of wisdom

dom and goodness which we can distinctly perceive in the works of God, and because the more thoroughly we understand them, we have the more clear, strong and undeniable demonstration of it, that the great Author and Governour of the universe is possessed of these perfections in the most absolute and complete manner; and, consequently, that all things are framed and ordered with the same wife and benevolent view, though in particulars it does not appear equally, and in some not at all, to our limited understandings. These therefore ought never to be confounded as identical propositions, viz. that the Divine being acts without a reason; and that we can see no reason in a particular constitution, or method of acting; because the latter does not in the least infer the former: but, on the contrary, 'tis rational to suppose, from the general evidences of his supreme and most perfect wisdom, that for every part of his conduct there is a good and fufficient reason, tho we may not be able to discover precisely what it is, And whether this may not be as fairly urged to vindicate the conduct of providence in not making the Christian religion universally known, as it is by the defenders of natural religion against Atheists, to answer many very important difficulties in the common courfe of it, which cannot be particularly accounted for; I submit to the judgment of every confiderate and ingenuous reader.

THE learned Dr. Clarke had intimated, upon principles, in the main, agreeable to those I have advanced, that a revelation could not, " be claim'd and demanded as of justice, " for then it must have been given in all " ages, and to all nations;" bur " rather " wish'd for and defired, as of mercy and " condescending goodness +." Upon which our author asks, " Can a Being be denomi-" nated merciful, and good, what is fo only to a few; but cruel, and unmerciful to the " rest *?". Certainly no: but it has been shewn, that the not bestowing equal capacities and advantages upon all, the not affording all mankind the same opportunities for obtaining the highest happiness, which their rational nature, if it had all proper belps, and helps that some enjoy, might be capable of, is not cruel, and unmerciful; and moreover, that it is the true state of the world, and confequently must be defended upon the foot of natural religion only. And I may add, that it is confistent with impartiality, so far as that is a real excellency, and a proper part of the Divine character, as well as with ablolute and universal goodness. For the impartiality of God does not confift in treating all his creatures, even of the same species, alike; it does not cramp him in the free distribution of his favours, in dispensing which he may act with what variety, and make what dif-

⁺ Sermons at Boyle's Lecture, 7th edit. p. 315.

ference he pleases; but regards chiefly, if not altogether, the execution of justice; and the most that it supposes is, that God is equally defirous that all men should obtain that happiness, which is suitable to their particular stations, capacities, and circumstances; and that in quality of their governour and judge, he has given them fufficient means to know and practife all that he requires from them, and will equally favour and reward the equally fincere, whatever be the difference of their advantages, in proportion to their improvements and services. And what is there in his favouring fome nations with the light of revelation, while he leaves others destitute of it, that is in the least inconsistent with this? May not all this, which is the only just and rational sense in which we can conceive of God as a being necessarily impartial, be allow'd; nay, is it not actually allow'd by the best advocates for revelation?

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When therefore the ingenious author goes on for several pages, in a popular declamatory way, to represent these as their principles, and particularly as the principles of the learned Dr. Clarke, because he had affirmed in the passage above-cited, that, "as God was not "obliged to make all his creatures equal; or to make men angels, or to endow all men "with the same capacities and faculties; so he was not bound to make all men capable of the same degree, or the same kind of hap"piness; or to afford all men the very same "means

" means and opportunities of obtaining it;" to represent these, I say, because he had asferted this, as his principles, that "God " made some people his favourites, without " any confideration of their merits; and " merely because they believe certain opini-" ons taught in that country, where they " happen to be born; while others, far the " greater number, shall, from age to age, want this favour; not upon the account " of their demerits, but because destin'd to " live in places, where God, who always acts " from motives of infinite wisdom and good-" ness, thought it best to conceal from them " all fuch opinions *;" and that, " all who " are equally fincere, are not equally accepta-" ble to God +;" and upon this entirely false account of them, describes his principles as " inconfistent with the character of God as a " being of unlimited benevolence, and with " his being no respecter of persons ;" and the like; fuch a conduct may justly be complain'd of as unfair and disingenuous. And I make no doubt, but that though fuch little arts in controversy, as the framing senses for our antagonists which we can easily barangue against and expose, senses, which their words even by torturing cannot be made to speak, may be a means of imposing upon the vulgar, and upon fuperficial thinkers who never examine any thing thoroughly, and confequently, whatever their outward circumstances may be, are in point

of reason and sound judgment, very little, if any thing, above the rank of the vulgar; wise men, and impartial inquirers after truth, will esteem them to be, what they really are, the weak supports of a feeble and tottering cause, and do the writers the justice they deserve.

Our author observes farther upon this head, that " when God acts as governour of " the universe, his laws are alike defign'd for " all under his government; that is, all man-" kind: and confequently, what equally " concerns all, must be equally knowable by " all *." If he means, that God cannot, as the governour of the universe, afford some men clearer notions of their duty than others, or reveal his will to some parts of the world, and deny that favour to the rest; I need fay nothing to it, having already shewn the contrary. God, as the governour of the world, makes a vast difference between his creatures; and even the laws of morality are not equally knowable to all, great numbers labouring under fuch difficulties, that their ignorance, even of important branches of natural religion, feems to be almost invincible. From whence 'tis plain, that what might be equally useful to ALL is not granted to ALL; or, in other words, all have not in one fense sufficient means (such means as are likely to be effectual) to discover it. But if he means,

that all are capable of knowing the laws of God, fo far as the knowledge of them is neceffary to render them acceptable to him, this is granted; but what doth it prove? Why only, that the knowledge of any particular revelation is not necessary to those, to whom that revelation is not given. He adds, " And if the universality of a law be the on-" ly certain mark of its coming from the go-" vernour of mankind; how can we be cer-" tain, that, which wants this mark, comes " from him +?" i. e. if we apply it to the present argument, if nothing can be a divine revelation but what is made known universally, we cannot be fure that any thing which is not made known univerfally is a divine revelation; or thus, if a revelation must be universal, it must be universal: a most certain, and felf-evident truth! If this author will be fo good, instead of afferting, to prove the premises, the consequence, we allow, will make itself.

VERY much to the same purpose is the following piece of reasoning, equally particular, and remarkable: "If God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, and the Christian religion be the only true and absolutely perfect religion;——it follows, that the Christian religion has existed from the beginning; and that God, both then,

and ever fince, has continued to give all " mankind sufficient means to know it; and " that 'tis their duty to know, believe, profefs, and practife it *." Here the ingenious author afferts, that if God was always willing, that all men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, he must always have given them fuch sufficient means to know it, as made it their duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it: fo that nothing, but what it has been the duty of ALL mankind, in all ages, to know, believe, profess, and practise, can, in his opinion, be that true religion, which God was willing that all should come to the knowledge of. I would ask then, has it been the duty of ALL mankind, at all times, and in every part of the world, to know all the branches of natural religion? If it has, and he means by their duty, what is the most obvious and only intelligible sense of the word, that God justly requires it of them as necessary to procure his acceptance, the consequence will be, that all idolaters, all the superstitious, and all who ever entertain'd unworthy and dishonourable thoughts of God, are absolutely debarred the divine favour; which, it it be the charity of his religion of nature, is with me an insuperable prejudice against it, and makes me set the higher value upon Christianity, as allowing its professors to entertain more generous and pleasing sentiments concerning the state of their fellow-creatures. And if it has not been

the duty of mankind, in all ages, and in every part of the world, to know all the branches of natural religion, his meaning can be no more than this, that God has given them fufficient means to know all he requires they should know: but as this is nothing fix'd and determinate, nothing that is particular can be inferr'd from it. This, as far as I can collect from other parts of his book, is really our author's sense; and I chuse the rather to think it so, because it is the most candid interpretation that can be put upon his words.

LET us confider now, what can be made of his reasoning upon this foot. " If God " was always willing, that ALL men should " come to the knowledge of the true reli-" gion;" i. e. should know all that he requires of them as necessary to secure his favour, which is no one entire fet of principles, but may be very various according to their different capacities, circumstances, and prejudices; and "the Christian" (which, suppofing it to be nothing else but natural religion revived, is a uniform certain thing, and a great deal more than God indispensably requires all to know) " be the only true re-" ligion; it follows, that the Christian re-" ligion has existed from the beginning;" or perhaps, that, in all the parts of it, it bardly ever existed at all; " and that God, both "then, and ever fince, has, and bas not, " continued to give all mankind fufficient

"means to know it; and that 'tis, and 'tis
"not, their duty to know, believe, profess,
"and practise it." Upon our author's principles, as I apprehend them, sincerity is the only thing that is absolutely insisted on to render men acceptable to God, which does not necessarily imply in it the knowledge or practise of all the duties of natural religion itself; nor consequently, that God has given all mankind such sufficient means to discover this true religion, as makes it their indispensable duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it; but quite the contrary.

ALLOWING however, that God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, i. c. of some certain and determinate system of principles and duties, the consequence he would draw from it is not in the least just, or natural, nor hardly intelligible. For natural religion was that true religion, which God from the beginning defigned for all mankind, and which, we will grant for the present, it was their duty (having fufficient means in order to that end, i. e. fuch means which, if they were fincere, must be effectual) to know, believe, profess, and practise; and if it had been known and practifed as it ought, it would have been sufficient for their happiness, and a revelation would perhaps have been needless, But does it follow from hence, that when this excellent religion was corrupted, a revelation might not be of great use; or, that if

God gave a revelation, it must be just the religion of nature restor'd; and that not one positive precept could be added to it, though with a view to be subservient to, and aid and strengthen moral obligations? At this rate of inferring, we need not mind what our premises are, but may jump at once to a conclusion. I shall say no more to this point now, because I shall have occasion to consider it more largely, when I come to discourse of positive duties.

CHAP.

CHAP. III.

Shewing, that we have a sufficient probability, even at this distance, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the New Testament; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth, and uncorruptedness of a traditional religion; with an answer to the arguments drawn from the change of languages, the different use of words, the style and phrase of scripture, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

TAVING proved thus largely, that notwithstanding the sufficiency of reafon, if rightly exercised, to discover all the necessary principles and duties of natural religion, an external revelation may be highly useful, when the light of nature is darkned, and ignorance idolatry and superstition have overspread the world, which was undoubtedly the case, when our blessed Saviour appeared to publish his religion; and having fully confidered all our author's reasonings upon this head, vindicated the conduct of providence G 4 in

in not making the Christian revelation univerfal; and shewn what is the proper evidence of the truth and divinity of any particular revelation, and how those, to whom it was given, might be satisfied that it really came from God: I proceed to consider objections of another kind, relating to the proof of it in after-times, the method of its conveyance, and its authority and usefulness as a standing rule. And,

In general, it must be own'd, that the evidence, whatever it be, cannot be so strong at a confiderable distance of time, as it was to those to whom the revelation was first made known, and who saw with their own eyes the miracles that were perform'd in confirmation of it; the evidence of fense being undoubtedly stronger, in the nature of the thing idelf, than the most unexceptionable tradition. However, if it can be shewn, that we have now all the probability that the thing is capable of, and fuch a probability, as always determines the affent of rational men in other cases, and upon which it would be thought very unreafonable not to act in the common concerns of life; every one that reflects must think it his interest to embrace the Christian doctrine, and not only acts weakly, but runs a great hazard, if he refuses to be determin'd by probability, merely because 'tis possible the thing may be otherwise, and will not submit to sufficient evidence, because he has not greater than in cases of this nature can be justly expected. A man man may as well refolve to believe nothing upon testimony, nor even the reports of sense, because 'tis possible these may deceive him, and infift upon firitt demonstration for every thing.

But the author of Christianity &c. has thrown together feveral things, to weaken the probability of the truth of revelation to us at this distance, and to persuade the world. that no great stress can be laid upon it; and befides, that it is, upon many accounts, a very obscure and uncertain rule. These I now proceed to examine distinctly, though indeed almost all this part might be trusted to stand without any remarks, if none but persons of thought and judgment were to read it; it being made up (as will appear in the fequel) of general affertions, possibilities, precarious suppositions, some of which the author himfelf feems to suspect; and which as they cannot conclude against any thing, more than they may conclude against every thing that is a matter of probability only, 'tis hard that an ingenuous writer should give us the trouble to confute.

[&]quot; If (fays he) it be but probable, that God " made any external revelation at all, it can " be but probable, though perhaps not in " in the same degree of probability, that he " made this or that revelation *." This is

^{*} P. 184.

very darkly express'd, because a probability that God has actually made a revelation can be nothing else but the probability of some particular revelation; as this therefore is fo very inaccurate and confused, I cannot apprehend it to be the ingenious author's fense. And it is with me much more than a perhaps, that if it was not antecedently probable, which I suppose he means, that God would make an external revelation (as I have already shewn it was not, and could not be, this being a matter of pure favour in which the Divine Being is absolutely free) there might be a great probability, that he had actually made a revelation. For if a doctrine appear'd in all the parts of it to be worthy of God, and was establish'd by unquestionable miracles, no man could doubt its being divine, whether he had any probable expectation of fuch an extraordinary interpolition of providence, or not; unless it can be shewn, that God is oblig'd to do every thing for his creatures, that will be of great use to them, in an extraordinary way, if, by accident, they miss of it in the natural and ordinary; or that he can bestow no favour upon them out of the common course of things, but what they have a particular reafon to expect. Whereas in truth, its being out of the common and general course is an argument, that however they might wish, and hope, and presume, they could have no probability that it would happen, if the original constitution and frame of things, notwithstanding the accidental irregularities to which

which it is subject, was, upon the whole, wife and good; which all must allow, who proceed upon the principles of natural religion, and, consequently, it may be taken for granted in the present argument.

But the reason why the probability is so low, that God hath made this, or that, i. e. in other words, any particular revelation, is, that " this evidence all pretend to, fince, " perhaps, there never was a time or place, " where fome external revelation was not " believ'd, and its votaries equally confident, " that theirs was a true revelation; which " shews how easily mankind may in this point " be impos'd on *." Let there have been ever so many pretences to a revelation, and let the feveral pretenders be ever so positive and confident, may there not be a rule by which it can be judged, whether any particular revelation be from God or no? If it be worthy of God, perfective of the rectitude and happiness of human nature, and confirm'd by numerous and undeniable miracles; will not this prove it to be of divine authority? And are not men, if they will examine, capable of seeing this proof? The ingenious author feems to argue, as if the truth of a revelation was to be decided by its being received and acknowledged as fuch, and the confident pretenfions of those that embrace it; and upon this foot indeed, all must be received, or none; and any particular one cannot be more probable than

the rest. But let him not make arguments for others, and then confute them. If there may be, in the nature of things (which is all that is contended for) a probability of the truth of any particular revelation, it may appear as strongly to all who consider it, let there be ever so many false claims, as if that particular revelation stood single in its pretensions.

He adds, " And as there can be no de-" monstration of the revelation itself, so nei-" ther can there be any of its conveyance to " posterity *." If he means strict demonstration, 'tis granted; if only probability, which one would judge he intends by the course of his reasoning, it has been already proved, that there may be probable evidence of the truth of a revelation; and I shall now inquire, whether there may not be the same of its conveyance? And as what this author has advanc'd upon this head is not in any regular order, but scatter'd up and down in several parts of his book, I shall endeavour, for the greater clearness, to reduce it to some method; beginning with what he afferts concerning probability in general, that " the very " nature of it is fuch, that were it only left " to time, even that would wear it quite es out; at least if it be true, what Ma-" thematicians pretend to demonstrate, viz. " that the probability of facts, depending on " human testimony, must gradually lessen, " in proportion to the distance of time when

P. 185.

" they were done *.". I need not, I think, concern myself with this mathematical calculation, and the rather, because the ingenious author himself does not seem to be in earnest when he mentions it, and introduces it as if he had but little dependence upon it; At least if it be true, &c. I would only ask therefore, whether 1700 years will, in his opinion, quite wear out this probability; or lessen it to such a degree, as that facts related in histories, at that distance, are not to be depended on? And whether he will readily admit, that this rule shall be applied indifferently to ALL antient histories? Whether, for instance, he has the least doubt about the authenticness of Casar's Commentaries, which were wrote before any of the books of the new testament? Nay, whether he doubts of the truth of some histories of greater antiquity? The putting these questions would, I am persuaded, be thought impertinent and ridiculous, were we not forc'd to it by fome modern writers, who make it their business to collect together all they can meet with, in order to furnish out a plausible story against revelation.

THE dispute is not, whether the probability was not greater to those who were either contemporaries, or lived within a few years after such antient histories were wrote; but only, whether allowing that it was, we may not

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have fuch a degree of probability as is sufficient to determine our affent, a probability that may be depended on, that removes all doubt, and upon which, even a wife man would venture confiderably? If fo, this is sufficient to justify our belief of Christianity, and acting accordingly. And for the truth of this, I appeal even to the advocates for natural religion in opposition to revelation, who, I make no doubt, will readily allow it, with respect to any other books besides those of the New Testament; and every man will find, if he confults what paffes in his own mind, that he is not dispos'd to doubt of the authenticness of any books of equal antiquity with these, if they are supported by an universal and uncontested tradition.

INDEED there is a great difference between oral tradition, and written. Things which depend entirely on the former may be more eafily corrupted, or lost; facts may lose some of their most material circumstances, or be greatly exaggerated; and 'tis hardly possible, that doctrines should be exactly remember'd, and transmitted down as they were taught at first; or men may think it of no importance to flick to the original words, if they preserve their general sense, which being to every man just as he apprehends it, false comments may easily pass for the doctrines themselves; or else they may alter insensibly. But when they are committed to writing, if we can prove, that the books which contain

an account of them are authentic, and the historians persons of sufficient capacity for the work they undertook, and of integrity; and that fuch writings are not corrupted fo as to obscure and pervert the general sense and defign of the authors, or necessarily to lead us into mistakes in important points; if we can prove this, I say, we may, at this distance, have the immediate and direct testimony, not only of persons who were able to inform themselves fully of the facts which they relate, but even of eye-witnesses; and consequently a fufficient probability of the truth of these facts. And unless we allow this, we destroy the credit and use of all the valuable remains of antient biftory. But 'tis scarce possible to be serious upon this argument with men, who cannot themselves beartily believe there is any thing in it. Had the same things been faid to invalidate the authority of Tacitus or Livy, these very persons would have made it the subject of their mirth and ridicule. And they may depend upon it, (and I am persuaded are too wise to make the experiment) that if they will but be honest, and true to their principle, and apply it in the same manner to common books of establish'd reputation, which it is not mens interest to difpute, as they do to the gospel-bistory, they themselves will meet with the same just treatment. In the mean time it is to be hoped, that the impartial world, from a regard to truth and justice in general, will not fail to shew their dislike of such absurd reasonings when

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when made use of against revelation, which in any other case they would freely and unanimously condemn.

AND now, the mere antiquity of the books of the New Testament being no argument against the probability of the facts related in them, even to us at this distance of time; nothing remains but to shew, that they are authentic and genuine, and contain a credible bistory. And I presume, that if the same evidence be produc'd, as passes for the authenticness and credibility of other books of as old a date, it will be allow'd to be fufficient; fince 'tis a probability that all readily acquiesce in, where religion and party-interest are out of the question, and that determines the conduct of the wifest, when a higher cannot be had, in the most important scenes of life.

THE author of Christianity &c. seems to have a strong suspicion of forgery, and frequently insinuates it, because we have these books "through the hands of men, who not only in the dark ages of the church, but even in the beginning, if we may judge by the number of corrupted passages, and even forg'd books, were capable of any pious fraud *." Whether the number of corrupted passages be so great as is here intimated, will be consider'd hereaster; at present, 'tis only to

my purpose to observe, that there is no direct evidence pretended to, that the books of the New Testament were forg'd, but only because something of this kind was done, a possibility that it may be so. But what will this prove? Is it so much as the shew of a just conclusion, that because some endeavour'd to impose feign'd books upon the world under the name of Matthew, or Paul, there are none extant which were really wrote by them, or that particular books, which were never questioned in any age, are forg'd? Wise men are not much influenc'd by mere possibilities, because the consequence would be, that they must doubt of almost every thing. And all the effect it can have upon such, in the prefent case, is, to put them upon using a prudent caution that they be not impos'd on; and then, they may have as rational satisfaction that particular books are authentic and genuine, as they could, if no fuch forgeries had

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For either there can be no proof that any books are genuine because some have been forg'd, which will not be faid; or elfe, there must be a special reason why if some books are forg'd under the name of a particular author, no books under that name can be genuine. But how can this affect the credit of a writing under the name of Paul, any more than of one under Cæsar's name, if the positive evidence of the authenticness of both be equal? If it be faid, that the evidence

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cannot be equal, because there have been forg'd books under Paul's name, but not under Casar's; and this begets a suspicion concerning the one, which is not natural concerning the other. I answer, that the ground of this suspicion, though there be an actual forgery prov'd and detected, is but a bare tossibility that there may be other forgeries, against all bissorical evidence; and this is possible with respect to Casar's writings, as well as St. Paul's.

But in truth, the detection of some forg'd writings under the names of the Apostles rather confirms, than in the least weakens, the authenticness of such as were never question'd, and against which, we cannot find, that any thing of moment was ever objected. For cheats discover'd had a natural tendency to make men more cautious and wary; and the importance of the thing itself, as it relates to religion, which, in the opinion of all the thinking honest part of mankind, is the most sacred concern in the world, would make them more upon their guard. And 'tis plain, by the instances of their diligence and success in detecting some frauds, that as they thought it a thing of great moment not to be impos'd on with respect to the genuine records of Christianity; they wanted neither capacity, nor inclination, to distinguish between those books which were authentic, and those which were not; and to expose counterfeits. Feign'd writings might eafily be discover'd by fincere and

inquisitive persons, at the time when they were first palm'd upon the world; and if any were so wicked, as to endeavour to make such writings pass for the genuine works of Apostolic and inspir'd men, 'tis hardly possible they could be universally receiv'd, unless we suppose, that all the professors of Christianity were an ignorant, tricking, faithless generation, without either sense, or integrity; which is in itself so mean and ungenerous a reflection, if it did not contradict the best accounts of history, that every adversary of revelation, who pretends to the character of a gentleman, should be asham'd of it.

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BESIDES, forgeries were the more likely to be detected, because in the earliest ages there were different sects of Christians, who were spies upon one another. And I may add, that 'tis extremely difficult to fix any time when fuch impostures could be safely attempted. For if books had been forged under the names of the Apostles in their lifetime, they themselves would soon have put astop to the cheat. If immediately after their decease, it must have been an easy matter to know, whether fuch books were authentic, or not. For persons very seldom leave any thing of this kind behind them, without communicating, and giving directions about it, to some or other of their intimate friends. Nay, when writings were of great importance, and defigned for the general use of the Christian world, 'tis very probable, that the H 2

authors of them would have declared their intentions publicly, that so all might be apprized of it; and that they would have been free and open to every Christian's perusal, both for the advantage they might receive from them, and to prevent all suspicion of imposture. The hand-writing might be compar'd with other undoubted originals; and the style, sentiment, and spirit of the performance would go a great way towards fixing its real author. Or if he employ'd an Amanuensis, 'tis not to be supposed (it being contrary to what is practifed by all mankind in matters of confequence) but that sufficient care was taken to convince the world that it was wrote by his direction: and no wife man would receive it without some proper credentials of this kind. That St. Paul, in particular, took this method, that so the authority of his epistles might not be disputed, is evident from these words in his 2d epistle to the Thessalonians: The falutation of Paul with my own hand, which is the token in every epiftle; fo I write *. And with respect to the epistles that go under his name it may be observed moreover, that 'tis absolutely improbable they were forg'd in the time we are now speaking of; because all of them, except those to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, were directed to very noted churches in large and populous cities, and confequently must have been heard of and known before his death; or else an appeal might have been

^{*} Chap. iii. 17.

made to those churches with the greatest ease, and their declaring that they never receiv'd fuch epiftles, which 'tis natural to think they would do voluntarily, whether they were appeal'd to or no, must immediately have detected the forgery. And if we remove the fraud to a farther distance, it will not at all fuit with the evidence we have of the greater antiquity of the books of the New Testament, from writings that were extant before any fuch supposeable period, in which they are expresly cited. These things I offer not as conclusive proofs, but only as strong prefumptions, which, taken altogether, render it far more probable than the contrary can be shewn to be, that the books of the New Testament are genuine.

But the probability rifes a great deal higher when we confider, that with respect to the far greater part, viz. the four gospels, the acts of the apostles, thirteen epistles of Paul, the first epistle of Peter, and the first of John, we have all the positive evidence that the nature of the case will bear. For to prove that they are justly attributed to the persons under whose names we receive them, there is the universal consent of antiquity. They were, several of them, quoted as theirs by contemporaries, in the very age in which they were wrote, and all in the immediately succeeding ages, and have, as far as appears, been constantly acknowledg'd in that character, both by friends and enemies. And I would ask

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now, fince no man can pretend to affign any one internal mark of forgery, what better evidence we have, nay indeed what higher evidence there can be, in the nature of the thing, that Cicero, Julius Casar, or any other Heathen writers, were the authors of those books which go under their names, than such an universal and undisputed tradition.

But supposing the books of the New Testament to be authentic and genuine, what proof have we that they are a credible bistory? The greatest that can reasonably be desired. For,

I. THERE is a very strong probability, that the persons who related the extraordinary facts contained in them were not them-Edwes imposed on. For of the four evangelists, two at least, viz. Matthew, and John, were eye-witnesses; and can any historian record any thing upon better assurance of its truth, than the evidence of his own fenses? It may be said, that this evidence ought indeed to be admitred with respect to all common events, but we must be cautious that we do not trust the fenses of others too far in cases that are supernatural; because fanciful and enthusiastic men have, in all ages, been very credulous this way, and equally positive and confident : or else, it could be no great difficulty for a skilful person to impose upon such illiterate rude people as the Apostles, who were altogether unacquainted with the powers of nature, and pais

Christian revelation defended. 103 pass off some secret, and to them unusual, operations of natural causes for real miracles.

To which it may be replied in behalf of the two writers above-mention'd, that there is not the least reason besides their belief of the miracles related in their history, (and to give this as reason is taking the very thing in dispute for granted) to charge them with credulity and enthufiasm; and that the apostles in general are very much injur'd, when they are represented as persons grossy ignorant; which has been carried too far even by some who have wrote excellent defences of Christianity, in order to render the propagation of the gospel, by such instruments, the more furprizing and marvellous. For let any man read Paul's defences of himself recorded in the AEts of the Apostles, and his epistles, and he will find fuch a knowledge of mankind, fuch an artful genteel and happy address, as argue the author to have studied human nature carefully, and made the wifest observations upon it, together with fuch acuteness and strength of reasoning, as few writers can pretend to. Nay, let him read the epistle of James, one of the illiterate apostles, fof the authenticness of which I can see no just ground to doubt, for reasons which will be mentioned when I come to speak of the controverted books) and even there he will meet with fuch judicious moral reflections, such a propriety, beauty, and elevation of thought, H 4

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as are very much above the capacity of the fishermen and mechanics of this age, and the farthest that can be from the strain of an entbusiass.

AGAIN, several of our Saviour's miracles were of such a nature, as cannot be supposed to have been merely imaginary, and in which the most enthusiastical could not well be deceiv'd, such as curing inveterate distempers by a word, raising the dead, &c. and are evidently above all the known powers and laws of nature.

Bur let us consider the case more particularly with respect to the resurrection of Christ, which, together with its consequences, is the chief strength of the Christian cause; and if it be once prov'd, confirms the reality of all the miracles faid to be perform'd by him in his life-time, and confequently all the preceding parts of the gospelhistory. Now 'tis plain, that the Apostles at their master's death thought all their hopes were loft, and did not expect his refurrection; and when they receiv'd the first report of it, were not forward to believe it: nay, one of them, viz. Thomas, (as is attested by an eyewitness *) was so scrupulous, as to infift upon the nicest scrutiny, and the strictest proof that the most prudent and cautious of our modern unbelievers could be tempted to

^{*} John xx. 25.

Christian revelation defended. 105 defire; for he would not believe, till by handling the wounds made in our Lord's crucified body he was convinc'd that there was a real resurrection, and that his senses were not impos'd upon by an airy phantom: fo that 'tis utterly improbable that they were deceiv'd by a too basty credulity. And besides. they had such a perfect remembrance of their mafter's person, with whom they had conversed intimately for several years, that they could not take another for him; or if this was possible, had he only made them one, and that a short and transient visit, it could not be the case, as the circumstances of the fact are related; for he not only submitted to be felt and examin'd, but to give them the greatest fecurity imaginable against a fraud, appear'd to them often, and tarried a confiderable time, eat, and drink, and convers'd freely with them, for the space of forty days; and if all these things might be transacted in a kind of dream, and be nothing but the reveries of a distemper'd imagination, 'twill be impossible for any man to prove that he is ever thoroughly awake. And fince the charge of credulity and enthusiasm fails, will the most confident opposers of revelation take upon them to fay, that this refurrection was not a true and proper miracle?

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LET me add farther, that with respect to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, we have the accounts from Luke in the acts of the apostles, and Paul in his epistles, who were

were both not only eye-witnesses, but the very persons posses d of these extraordinary powers. And the nature of the thing itself (as to some of these powers at least) happens to be such, as will not admit of a deception. For the weakest enthusiast may know (for instance) as certainly, and without a possibility of being imposed on, whether he is enabled, all of a sudden, to speak languages he never learn'd intelligibly, and easily; he may, I say, as certainly know this, as the wisest and soberest reasoner, and the greatest philosopher, that ever liv'd.

ALL this, it may be faid, only proves, that these writers were not themselves impos'd on, in the accounts they have given us of the miracles by which Christianity was confirm'd; but what probability have we that they have made a just relation of our Saviour's discourses, and consequently of the substance of the Christian Doctrine? Why in this, they testified only of what they heard, as in the other case, of what they saw. To these discourses 'tis very likely they gave the utmost attention, and heard them for the main frequently repeated; by which means they would make the deeper impression upon their minds, and be more eafily remember'd. And if the history of the miracles be true, there is no difficulty at all in supposing, that where their memories fail'd, they were extraordinarily affisted in recollecting the fermons and parables of Christ, so far as was necessary to give

give a complete view of his religion, and enable them to teach and publish the fame doctrine after his decease. Let us therefore, having briefly consider'd the capacity of the gospel-historians to be perfectly inform'd of all the facts which they relate, proceed to examine.

2. WHAT may be faid for their integrity. or in other words what probability there is, that as they were not deceiv'd themselves, they would not impose on others; by which we shall establish, beyond all just exception, the truth of their history. And if we look into the history itself, we find an air of bonesty and impartiality running thro' the whole of it. The great defign of it, in all its parts, is to recommend the strictest truth and fidelity, and, in general, the noblest perfection of virtue and true goodness. The writers punctually relate not only fuch things as redounded to their master's bonour, but several other circumstances, which in the opinion of the world, and according to vulgar prejudices, had a quite different aspect, such as the obscurity and meanness of his birth and parentage, his low despicable condition in life, and the like; and are very particular in fecounting their own failings with all their aggravations, their ignorance and dullness of apprebenfion, their cowardice in deserting their master, and Peter's absolute denial of him with horrid oaths and imprecations. This is very much like the artless simplicity of upright and difin-

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difinterested men. But as 'tis possible it might be put on, to procure themselves the reputation of well-meaning and credible historians, I shall lay no more stress upon it than it deserves; and consider it not as direct proof, but as a circumstance that looks well, and, in conjunction with others, must have its weight. Let us inquire therefore what was their general character. And,

IT appears from all accounts, that they were persons of strict and exemplary virtue, against the integrity of whose conduct upon the whole, nothing of moment was ever urg'd by the most malicious enemies of Christianity, which certainly gives great strength to their testimony. And the force of this argument is very much increas'd by observing, that they could have no worldly interest to promote by publishing such false accounts. They had no prospect of honour to allure their ambition, nor of riches to gratify their covetousness, nor of ease and pleasure to suit a tafte for indolence and luxury; but on the contrary, were oblig'd to practife humility, mortification, and felf-denial, and the appearance of every virtue, which could not but be a very uneasy restraint to men of corrupt and vicious minds; and as their doctrine overturn'd the forms of religion that were establish'd in all Nations, and contradicted the general prejudices and vices of the world, they were fure of reproaches and fufferings; (not only as the probable consequences of their perfifting

fisting to declare the Christian doctrine, but consequences of which their master had expressly forewarn'd them) all which they unanimously, courageously, and chearfully endur'd, and gave the bigbest proof of an inflexible bonesty, by dying to vindicate the truth of their testimony.

I no not suppose, that mens suffering, or even dying, in defence of any particular religion is in itself an argument of the truth of it; but 'tis the strongest probability in the world that they believe it to be true. For to fuppose several persons to have enter'd into a confederacy to lose their all, and expose themselves to contempt, loss of liberty, torments and death, for the fake of attesting what they knew to be a fallhood, from which therefore they could expect no possible advantage in another life to recompense their miseries here; to suppose them, I say, not to be push'd on by the heat of a false religious enthusiasm, but to be deliberate, cool, and inflexible in such a purpose as this; and confequently to have entirely extinguished that love of ease, and aversion to pain and misery, which are so strong and universal in human nature; is supposing both against its reason and passions, and against the common experience and observation of mankind. And in the present case, if the Apostles themselves believ'd the extraordinary facts which they have related, they must have been true; because the circumstances that attended them have

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been shewn to be such, that they could not be impos'd upon.

IF, therefore, it be not unsuitable to our, wifest notions of the supreme Being, to suppose him to take compassion on the ignorance and corruption of his reasonable creatures, and make at any time an extraordinary revelation of his mind and will; if fuch a revelation was highly for the advantage of mankind in their corrupt and degenerate circumstances; and if the Christian doctrine (as it is convey'd down to us in the writings of those who heard it from Christ himself, and were appointed to publish it throughout the world) be in all respects worthy of God, and consequently worthy actually to be this revelation; the contrary to which has never yet been prov'd by the most learned and judicious of its adverfaries; we are certainly under the strongest obligations to believe the miraculous facts by which it is supported, upon the credible testimony above-mention'd. For in no case that depends upon testimony can we have stronger evidence of the truth of a fact than this, that 'tis related by eye-witnesses, or actors in it, and persons of establish'd veracity. And if we refuse to admit it upon such evidence, when there is nothing in the abstract nature of the thing itself to invalidate their testimony, we destroy the credibility of all antient bistories, and can indeed believe nothing upon tradition or testimony, nothing but what is subjected to our own senses. NAY

NAY farther, as the ingenious Dr. Ibbot has very justly observed, * Since " the ac-" counts which the Evangelists have given " us in their writings, are of things which " they faw, and heard themselves, or had " from those who did so;" since " they lived " in the time and place, when and where " the things which they write of were pub-" lickly transacted; their writings deserve " greater credit than any other writings what-" ever. For how few of those things, re-" lated by other historians, are fuch as they " themselves were present at, and saw? 'Tis " needless to mention Herodotus, Diodorus " Siculus, Livy, Suetonius, Curtius, and o-" ther historians who have given us an ac-" count of the Assyrian or Persian, the Greek " or Roman affairs; and who have wrote of " things that were done many ages before " they were born, and in fuch parts of the " world as were very remote from their own " habitations. I shall only instance in one " writer, and that is Cornelius Tacitus, in " that part of his history, where he is giving " an account of the destruction of Jerusalem, " and takes occasion to tell us the whole " story of the city and people of the Jews " from their first beginning. 'Tis scarce " credible how many groundless and childish " tales, what stupid and evidently false ac-" counts that celebrated historian has heap'd

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^{*} Sermons at Boyle's Letture, p. 97.

"together, and which he might eafily have known to be such even in Rome itself where he liv'd, from the great numbers of Jews of all sorts and ranks which resorted this ther, and especially from the history of Josephus, which was then in being, and at the emperor's command was reposited in the publick library."

THUS we have feen, that 'tis highly probable the first propagators of the Christian revelation were not impos'd on themselves, and did not defign to impose on others. The author of Christianity &c. supposes, that " we ought to be certain, that they could " not be impos'd on themselves, and would " not impose on others; or in other words, " were infallible and impeccable *." But, (1.) I don't fee how absolute infallibility can be necessary in order to their giving such a credible testimony as no rational man can doubt of; for none of the reports of fense are, ftrictly speaking, infallible. Is not therefore the testimony of eye-witnesses, if we are fatisfied they actually faw the things they relate, sufficient evidence in any case? Shall we reject a probability that they were not deceiv'd, which in affairs of the greatest moment 'tis reckon'd madness to dispute, only because 'tis possible they might? Men can no more doubt of many things for which they have only probable evidence, than they could

if they had the most certain and infallible demonstration. Indeed, what is it but probability that is the great spring of human actions, and determines our most important persuits? What but a credible testimony, a testimony not strictly infallible, that decides in all courts of judicature, where our most valuable properties, and even life itself, are concern'd? Is it not then sufficient to establish the credibility of the gospel historians, that the accounts they give are of things which they faw, and heard; and that to suppose they were impos'd on renders the evidence of sense itself uncertain and precarious? Or, must we infift, in this case alone, not only upon a good probability that they were not, but an absolute impossibility that they should be deceiv'd? Nothing can be more perverse and unreasonable. Again,

Why must it be thought necessary, to make their testimony credible, that they should be impeccable? As without their being strictly infallible, we may have the highest probability that they were not deceived; so, without supposing they were impeccable, we may have sufficient assurance of their bonesty. Where is the man in the world that is impeccable? But is no man therefore to be believed? May we not be firmly persuaded, upon good grounds, that he has too much virtue and generosity to deceive us, without knowing that he cannot? And would it not be a very strange conduct, if men of approved integrity

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grity were not credited, even in cases upon which the happiness of life depends, only for wanting a character that is too perfect for human nature in the present state? Must not, at this rate, all the bufiness and commerce of mankind, all mutual confidence, and intercourse of good offices be suspended, and every one stand fingle and belpless in the midst of fociety? Nay, must not societies disband, which we are fure can never be supported while there is universal jealousy and distrust? And let but the fame credit be given to the testimony of the Apostles, of whom it has been prov'd that they were persons of great fincerity and virtue, as is constantly allow'd to the testimony of bonest unexceptionable witnesses in courts of judicature, and in all concerns of human life, and we must admit the truth of their history. For men have not the least doubt of things which are thus attested, if they are not in themselves incredible; they negotiate affairs, and run hazards upon fuch a probability; and therefore if they were fair and impartial, they would not fcruple to believe Christianity upon the same evidence, and would act as that belief directs.

BUT our author proceeds farther, and advances some things which are more immediately to the purpose of the present argument, as they directly attack the integrity of the gospel-historians. These therefore I shall particularly consider, not for any strength that I apprehend to be in the objections

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jections themselves, or because I have so mean an opinion of this writer's good sense as to imagine, that he himself believes there is any great weight in them, but that nothing plaufible may so much as feem to lie against the truth of their testimony. 'Tis needless to infift largely upon what he urges, from our Saviour's faying to those, who bad prophesied, and cast out devils in his name, Depart from me ye that work iniquity *, viz. " that nei-" ther prophecies, nor miracles are absolute " fecurities for men to depend on +," because it may be granted they are not, if the doctrine that is taught be not in itself rational, and worthy of God. And as prophecies and miracles were only defigned to attest the truth of the doctrine, and not the honesty and virtue of the persons that preach'd it, nothing can be inferr'd from hence that is a real prejudice to Christianity; especially if we suppose, what was undeniably true with respect to Judas, as long as he had the power, which this author speaks of, " of doing mi-" racles, even to the raising of the dead t," that they were not openly and scandalously immoral; and, consequently, that their vices could not bring a dishonour upon the religion they propagated. Besides, how does this in the least affect the credit of those writers, on whose accounts of Christianity we depend? Because some prophets, and persons that did miracles, might work iniquity; are they prov-

* Mat. 7. 22, 23: + P. 245. ‡ 1bid.

ed to be workers of iniquity? Or, because "one of the Apostles betray'd his master "for the paltry sum of thirty pieces of sil-"ver *," must they all be thus base, unfaithful, and treacherous?

Bur " the other Apostles not only fled, " and deferted him, but the chief of them " for swore him, as often as he was ask'd " about his being one of his followers; and " he, as well as Barnabas, was afterwards " guilty of a mean piece of dissimulation. " And Paul and Barnabas had fuch a sharp " contention, though about a very indifferent " matter, as to cause a separation +." What does all this tend to? To destroy the general character of the Apostles as bonest and well-defigning men, and prove that the histories they wrote are not to be credited? Certainly no Inference can be more forc'd, and unnatural. For does a man's committing one or two base actions in the whole course of his life, tho attended with very heinous aggravations, absolutely destroy his credit, when he has given the strongest evidence of his having repented of them, and practifed ever after such a strict and inflexible virtue, as no temptations, no hope of worldly advantage, or fear of fufferings, could corrupt? Is no allowance to be made for the frailty of human nature, and sudden passions which disarm the mind, and render the fuccours of reafon useless? May not a person be so surprized Christian revelation defended. 117 by an unexpected temptation, as to betray the cause of virtue, who would sooner die, than meditate and utter a cool deliberate falshood? And was not this beyond dispute the case of the Apostles?

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IF when their grief had dispirited them, and in the consternation they were under at feeing all their hopes of a temporal kingdom disappointed, they fled, and deserted their master; they afterwards preach'd him boldly, in defiance of all the terrors of the world, and bore their testimony to the truth of his doctrine, miracles, and refurrection, with a noble contempt of dangers and death. If Peter denied and forswore bim, it cost him a deep and bitter repentance; and this repentance was demonstrated to be fincere by his unshaken steadiness and constancy afterwards. and chusing deliberately to die rather than again deny bim. And if be, as well as Barnabas, was guilty of a mean piece of dissimulation, to the betraying the liberty of the Gentile converts, in compliance with the stiffness and prejudices of the Yews, it does not follow that this was defign'd dishonesty; might it not be a mere error of judgment about the prudential part of conduct? And to strengthen this, which is by far the most fair and candid supposition; was not his behaviour upon the whole the reverse of wilful falfbood? Or is every one who has once or twice diffembled and prevaricated, from a mistake more probably, than a principle of infincerity

rity, a witness not fit to be credited; especially if when we view him in the general course of his actions (which is the only just way of estimating characters) he plainly appears to be a person of honour and integrity, and when all circumstances conspire to confirm the truth of his testimony?

NOTWITHSTANDING these blemishes and faults in the lives of the Apostles, we may, I am persuaded, challenge the adverfaries of Christianity to produce witnesses so credible to any fact, in any age, or biftory, as they; men that overcame the strongest prejudices against the doctrine they embrac'd, and propagated; that afferted it in opposition to all their interests, and without the least distant prospect of bonour, or advantage; whom the cruellest persecutions could not discourage; nay, who bravely dy'd in defense of it. Let those, who now take an ungenerous pleasure in aggravating their failings, consider the difficulties they labour'd under, and the uncommon temptations with which they were oblig'd to encounter, and then ask themfelves feriously, whether they know of any, who they have reason to believe, in such circumstances, would have had fewer; and whether upon the whole, they are not very extraordinary examples of integrity and courage?

EVEN the weakness and cowardice they before discover'd rather confirms than invalidates

dates the testimony they gave afterwards. For that the very fame persons should adhere inflexibly to the cause of him whom they had deserted, with nothing in expectation but disgrace and fufferings, and dying the death of malefactors, can be accounted for no other way than this, that they were fenfible of the crime they had committed, and had arm'd themselves with the greater resolution. And what could be sufficient to animate and support such a resolution, but a firm belief of the truth of the doctrine they preach'd? What but their being convinc'd that it was their indispensable duty to maintain and defend it; and preferring what they apprehended to be the cause of true religion, and the reformation and happiness of mankind, to all other confiderations? There is no proof in the world fo strong as this of mens being in earnest; and to urge their equivocating, and being afraid to own the truth in one or two instances, as an argument why they are not to be depended on, when they afferted and maintain'd it to the hazard of their ease, liberties, and lives, is urging contradictions to support each other. With respect to the Apostles, the appearances of danger were not at all lessen'd, but more near and immediate. And therefore, when we find these same searful men, who had before manifested such weakness and pufillanimity, inspir'd with an invincible fortitude and constancy; we cannot help supposing what has been already suggested, either that they were more firmly I 4

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that when their fears betray'd them it was thro' furprize, whereas their after-conduct, in which they discover'd so much honesty and intrepidity, was the result of their deliberate judgment, upon a full conviction of their necessity of such a behaviour; or else, that God afforded them extraordinary supports in proportion to the greatness of their trials, that they might bear up in publishing so excellent and useful a doctrine as the Christian revelation contain'd, against all the opposition that was made to it by the prejudices and vices of the world.

THE objection which the ingenious author makes against the characters of Paul and Barnabas, to lessen their credit as bifforians, or witnesses to the facts of Christianity, viz. that they " had fuch a sharp conten-. stion, tho about a very indifferent matter, ss as to cause a separation," scarce deserves a grave answer. For stiffness, heat, and vebemence of temper, are very different things from dishonesty; and the proving against a person that he was apt to grow warm in dispute, and fometimes to quarrel with his best friends, would not (if his veracity was unblemish'd) be of the least weight, nor at all affect his credit as a witness in any court of judicature. And yet this is much more than can be shewn to be included in the present case. For the whole of the fact, as it is related in the acts of the Apostles, amounts to

no more than this; that they differ'd once about the expediency of chusing a particular person to be a companion in their travels (which might not be quite so indifferent a matter as this author represents it) and were each so intent and eager upon gaining his point, that they separated upon it. But it does not appear, that they manag'd the debate in an indecent abusive way, or that they parted without a persect friendship and esteem for each other.

AND as to what he adds farther with relation to St. Paul, that " even he fays, * The " good that I would, I do not; but the evil " which I would not, that I do. - But I fee " another law in my members, warring against " the law of my mind, and bringing me into " captivity to the law of fin, which is in my " members. And a great deal more to the " fame purpose +;" I am forry to observe, that it shews a determin'd resolution, if possible, to asperse one of the greatest characters in history, whose generous services for the good of others, noble ardour in the cause of liberty, and inflexible felf-denying virtue, none of the opposers of Christianity have ever exceeded, and few of them can pretend to equal without the most manifest disadvantage. Even an ingenuous adversary would take pleasure in doing justice to such extraordinary merit, and not entertain a thought of detracting from it;

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and the very attempt to represent this excellent Apostle as a slave to his appetites, influenc'd by carnal views, and one that acted against the reason and judgment of his own mind, must sink the reputation of any writer with considerate and impartial men.

But does he not expresly affert all this of himself in the passages referr'd to? Our author indeed feems to think fo, but it appears from many other inflances, as well as this, that the excellency of his genius does not lie in writing comments upon scripture; but that on the contrary, he frequently quotes independent passages merely for their found, and the appearance they make; which would be exclaim'd against as barbarous treatment of any other writers, and can ferve only to amuse and confound an ignorant and inattentive reader. And with respect to the instance now before us, 'tis plain to every one that reads St. Paul's epiftles with care, and a defire to understand them, that he was a most genteel and tender writer, and oftentimes speaks of things, that might otherwise be ungrateful and offensive, in his own name, when the characters he gives belong entirely to others, and not at all to himself. Thus in this very epistle to the Romans, * If the truth of God hath more abounded through my lye, why am I judged as a sinner? i. e. not I Paul, but I who make the objection, At other times, he

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puts himself into descriptions of the corrupt and deplorable state of Gentile idulaters before their conversion. And that we are to make use of this key to find out the true sense of those passages in the 7th chapter to the Romans, which this author has abus'd, is evident from hence; that the description there given is of a vicious man, who had pretty strong convictions of his duty, but acted against the light and dictates of conscience; of one whose passions were too strong for his reason, and brought him into captivity; who was carnal, and fold under fin; a phrase that always denotes a state of wilful and babitual wickedness. And besides the great absurdity of supposing, that St. Paul design'd to represent his own character in this view, at the same time that he set up for a reformer, and therefore was oblig'd to affect the appearance at least of extraordinary fanctity; besides this, I say, that he had not really such bad thoughts of bimfelf, and consequently, that what he says is intended as a representation of others, though he speaks in his own name, is plain, beyond all dispute, from several passages in his epistles, in which 'tis undeniable he must mean himself personally; because he either vindicates his own character, or proposes himself as an example for imitation, or appeals to those to whom he wrote for his integrity. Thus particularly, in his epistle to the Thessalonians he fays, Ye are witnesses, and God also, bow bolily, and justly, and unblameably we behav'd

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ourselves among you that believe ++. To the Corinthians, This is our rejoicing, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly fincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, or according to that excellent and perfect rule of morality which is contain'd in the gospel, we have had our converfation in the world *; that he knew nothing by, or against, bimself +; that he kept under his body, and brought it into subjection . And to mention no more, he refents with a generous fcorn and indgnation the scandalous charge of those, who represented him as walking after the flesh; and declares, that though he walk'd in the flesh, he did not walk after the flesh **. Is it then at all natural to suppose, that he meant himself, when he drew a character directly the reverse of this; especially when we find, that it was a very usual thing with him (as indeed it is common with writers now) to speak in his own name things that were entirely defign'd for others; and when it appears from the whole of his history, that he fully deserv'd that all those things should be affirm'd of him, which, notwithstanding his great modesty, he was oblig'd to mention in his own vindication, and to flence the calumnies of his adversaries? Such a method of explaining passages is contrary to all rules of fair interpretation; and whatever other purposes it may serve, is the way to make any author for ever unintelligible.

IT will be needless to take much notice of what is farther alledg'd ++ from the catholic epistle of St. Barnabas, " That Jesus, " when he chose his Apostles, which were " afterwards to publish his gospel, took men " who had been very great finners; that there-" by he might plainly shew, he came not to call " the righteous, but finners to repentance *," be the words ever so much stronger and fuller in the original +; or of the scurrility of Celsus (of which I choose to give an English translation, that the unlearned reader may not think there is any thing of argument in it) viz. " that Jesus having pick'd up ten or eleven " infamous men, the most profligate publi-" cans and fishermen, strol'd about the coun-" try with them, demanding [or begging and " mumping for] victuals in the most base and " shameful manner ‡;" 'twill be needless, I fay, to take much notice of this, because whatever their character was before they became the followers of Christ, they behav'd afterwards, in the general course of their actions, with the greatest bonour and integrity, and gave such evidence of an ingenuous temper of mind as few histories can

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^{††} P. 49. * Wake's Translation, \$5. p. 272:

^{† &}quot;Οντας ύπερ κάσαν αμαρτίαν ανομωτέρες.

I The words, as this author gives them in the Latin translation, are, p. 50. Jesum, ascitis decem undecimve famosis hominibus, publicanis, nautifque nequissimis, cum his ultro citroque fugitasse, corrogantem cibos sordide ac turpiter. Origen. cont. Celfum. l. 1. p. 47

parallel. When they bore witness to the truth of Christianity, their lives in the main were unexceptionable, nay, fit to be propos'd as examples for the world to imitate. And nothing but an uncommon degree of honesty and resolution could break such strong habits of vice, and cause such a prodigious alteration in their conduct.

Nor do I think that what the ingenious author adds, " in support of St. Barnabas," either confirms his account of them before they were chosen to be Apostles, or in the least invalidates their testimony, viz. " that they " first became Jesus's disciples upon temporal " motives; and the belief of Christ's tempo-" ral kingdom was fo firmly rooted in them. " that Jesus neither during his life, nor even " after his refurrection, was able to remove " it +." For does this prove that they were the basest and vilest of men? Nay, does their falling in with the common error of their country-men prove, even in general, that they were bad men? How could persons of real probity and virtue become the disciples of one, whom they took to be their Messiah, but upon temporal motives, when they had no notions of his kingdom but as a temporal kingdom? 'Tis plain, however, that though they retain'd this false notion even after our Saviour's refurrection, they were at length convinc'd of their mistake, and propagated

his doctrine without the least hope of preferment, or worldly advantage. And what better evidence could they give of their honesty than overcoming their strongest prejudices; correcting a favourite and darling sentiment, upon which all their hopes were originally grounded; and adhering to the cause of Christ, not only when the temporal motives upon which they set out ceas'd to operate, but in defiance of the bitterest reproaches, the greatest abuses and sufferings, and all the terrors of an ignominious and cruel death?

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THUS have I particularly confider'd every thing, that I know is urg'd by the author of Christianity &c. against the moral character of the writers of the New Testament, with a view to weaken the credibility of their history. As this is a point of the highest importance, with which the truth of the Christian religion itself must either stand, or fall, I was not willing to pass by any part of it; though perhaps I shall be censur'd for taking notice of some things, which may be thought too trifling to deserve a serious animadversion. And it must be a great pleasure to the friends of Christianity, that the most critical and malicious inquirers, who rake together all that looks plausible, and strain and exaggerate every circumstance, can find so few faults in the lives of men, who were call'd to act fo nice a part, and met with fuch extraordinary temptations and difficulties. Theirs, it must be remember'd, in the whole extent of it, was

was a part but once acted; and therefore we can't be fure, that the most virtuous, who struggle bravely with the common trials of life, would behave well in it. And the greatest of their defects are eafily to be accounted for by supposing, that, in the beginning especially, they were liable to furprizes, from which the most bonest and resolute are not always exempted, and by which they may be betrayed. We may therefore fafely rest the matter upon this issue, the capacity and integrity of the writers of the New Testament, as what is fully sufficient to establish the credibility of their history. But there are some other circumstances that very much beighten the probability, which I shall therefore briefly mention. And,

- I. It ought not to be omitted, that the fame facts are related in the gospels by four different historians (and two of 'em, at least, eye-witnesses) with so much agreement in all material passages, as has greatly the air of veracity; but with so much variety, as shews they were not wrote in concert.
- 2. These histories were published but a few years after the facts recorded in them are pretended to have been performed, in a manner open and visible to the whole Jewish nation. The accounts contained in them are also, in several instances, very particular and circumstantial, with specification of time and place, and of the names and characters of the per-

persons concern'd; which made it much more easy (if there had been any) to detect the imposture. And this publication of them was not in remote and distant countries, where there was no danger of discovering the cheat, but upon the very same stage where the miracles are faid to have been wrought. Now all this is a strong probability, that the authors of these accounts were sure of the goodness of their cause, and did not fear the utmost wit and malice of their enemies. For 'tis hardly supposeable, that the most bold and impudent impostors would put the entire success of their undertaking upon the truth of facts, that to a whole nation were notoriously false; and besides, 'tis morally impossible such accounts should gain credit; but on the contrary, pretences to known and public miracles, when nothing at all of that kind was perform'd, must necessarily have been confuted, and confequently have ended in the speedy and entire suppression and ruin of Christianity.

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It has indeed been objected, that several books may have been written to expose the imposture of the first Christians, which afterwards, when they got the power in their own hands by the conversion of the Roman Emperors, were destroy'd; but that no such contradictory accounts were ever publish'd, early enough to invalidate the authority of the gospel-history, is to me most evident from a consideration that has been already suggested, viz. that the immediate consequence of it, the

world being so little inclin'd to favour Christianity must have been its utter extirpation. And fince it was not crush'd in its very infancy, as without doubt it would have been, if those who propagated it had been convicted of fraud and knavery; nay, fince it grewand flourish'd in spite of all the opposition that was made to it, which, upon the supposition that the gospel-history was contradicted and confuted, no reasonable man can account for; this affords the strongest presumption, that a thing of that nature was never attempted, and consequently that the objection is a mere calumny, invented by the enemies of our holy religion for want of better evidence. I call it a calumny, because it is design'd to throw an odium on a body of men upon mere surmise and conjecture, which has no folid foundation to support it; and if this must pass for evidence, no histories in the world can stand, because we cannot be fure that they have not, at some time or other, been contradicted; and thus men may reject every thing which they have no mind to believe.) We may observe,

3. WITH respect to the extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost after our Saviour's resurrection, that St. Paul in his epistles to Christian churches mentions these gifts as very common among them, appeals to their own knowledge and experience, and leaves the truth of Christianity, and his own authority, to be entirely determin'd by this

Christian revelation defended. 131 this fact. But can we suppose, that any one of common modesty, shall I say, or common prudence, would act thus, if he knew that all he had wrote was false? Had it not a natural tendency to bring his character, and the cause in which he was embarqu'd, into contempt? And can it be thought, that among such numbers, none would have ingenuity and honesty enough to contradict and expose such an im-

enough to contradict and expose such an impudent and barefac'd falshood. Would not such appeals, for which there was no real foundation, soon have been known by the enemies of Christianity; and could a few insignificant persons have stood the just ridicule and indignation of all the virtuous part of mankind upon such an occasion? Must not

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But we find that the apostle Paul proceeds much farther, even to blame the Corinthians for an abuse of their extraordinary gifts, and particularly of the gift of tongues *; and can we think that they would have born this rebuke, if they had been so far from misimproving and perverting such extraordinary powers, that they were never posses d of them? Or would a man of any sense or knowledge of the world, especially a cunning impostor, have made an objection, to which so ready an answer might be given, and an answer that must have beer, so much to his confusion, and

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^{*} In the 121'a, 13th, and 14th chapters of his first epistle.

have greatly endanger'd his main design? Mens vanity perhaps may be so strong, that when they are commended for extraordinary qualities which they really want, they may think it agreeable enough, and not be forward to undeceive the world, by declaring themselves unworthy of the great honour that is done them; but when such gifts are mention'd in a way that is a repreach to them, the same principle will naturally incline them to detect the cheat. And there must have been the more danger of it in the case of the Corinthians, because there was a false Apostle among them, who fet himself up in opposition to St. Paul, and endeavour'd to lessen and degrade his ministry; for such a one, with the faction he had actually form'd, would undoubtedly have thought this an excellent handle to blaft his credit, and it's likely, have made a merit of ruining his reputation by a shew of zeal for truth, and by discovering and exposing imposture.

I'm may feem strange, perhaps, notwith-standing all that has been said, if the extraordinary facts recorded in the New Testament were really perform'd, that no other historians, who liv'd about that time, should take notice of them; none but Christian writers, who are too much a party to have any considerable weight in this controversy, because they were engag'd to be advocates for them by their very profession of Christianity. To which the answer is plain (without entering at all into

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into the debate how far the matter of fact is true) that the filence of historians as to some things, which are unquestionable, is frequent in other cases, as well as in this; that it does not, in the nature of the thing, at all invalidate the testimony of those who are upon all accounts credible; that if we could not affign a reason for it, it would be no wonder, confidering that we know not the principles by which men are directed and influenc'd; that, however, this omission might be owing to those facts not falling in with the general defign of their history; and besides, it could not reasonably be expected, that while they continued Jews or Heathers, they should relate events so favourable to a new religion, and by which they must condemn themselves, the one for rejecting their Messiah, and the other for perfifting in the idolatry and fuperstition of their ancestors; and if they became Christians upon the credit of these facts, their testimony would no more be admitted than that of other Christian writers of equal antiquity. But we have, to confirm the credibility of the gospel-history, with respect to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost conferr'd upon the Apostles, &c. what fully supplies the want of this foreign testimony, and is indeed abundantly superior to it, viz. the success of the gospel; an event, which is just what might be expected if this history be true, but upon the contrary supposition is very strange and unaccountable.

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THAT a great part of the world is now Christian we all know; we are sure likewife, that it has been fo for many ages past: and if we look back and inquire when it came to be fo, we find by the concurrent testimony both of Pagan and Christian Historians, that Christianity had its beginning in Judea, just at the time in which the facred bistorians place it. And by the same testimony we learn, that in a very short space, in about forty years after, it was preach'd in all the provinces of the Roman empire; and that wherever it was preach'd, it made a very fwift progress, insomuch that in a few years the number of Christians became very confiderable. For that they had increased greatly at Rome, fo early as in Nero's reign, we learn from the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus; who informs us, that when the Emperor, to clear himself from the charge of burning that city, laid the blame of it upon the Christians, and, began, under that pretence, a most severe and cruel persecution of them, a great multitude * fuffer'd. And it was not much above fixty years after the Apostles had dispers'd themselves, in order to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, when Pliny proconsul of Bithynia wrote that epiftle to the emperor Trajan, in which, giving an account of the Christians, then under a severe persecution for their religion by the emperor's order, and

^{*} Ingens multitudo. Annal. lib.

desiring to be instructed how he should proceed towards them, he tells him, that, "he "thought it a matter worthy of deliberation, chiefly because of the great number of persons that [by the laws against Christians] were in danger of suffering. For many of every age, of all orders, and of both sexes are call'd in question, and will be. For this superstition has not only insected cities and towns, but the villages and hamlets. The temples of the Gods are almost desolate, the solemn rites of our religion have been long neglected and or mitted, and there are scarce any who will buy the sacrifices †."

Now what account shall we give of this great event? 'Tis utterly improbable, that Christianity prevail'd so much in the world, in so short a time, only by natural means. The gift of tongues was absolutely necessary to enable the Apostles to propagate the gospel in all nations; and if they had a sufficient skill in all the languages of the different countries, without other miracles, they could never have convinc'd mankind that their master was a prophet sent from God, nor have engaged them to submit to the authority

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[†] Visa est mihi res digna consultatione; maxime propter periclitantium multitudinem. Multi enim omnis ætatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexus vocantur in periculum, & vocabuntur; neque enim civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis illius contagio pervasit. Prope desolata sunt Deorum templa, sacra solennia diu intermissa, & rarissimi victimarum emptores. Epist. 97.

of his religion. For suppose they had gone into any part of the world remote from Judea, and after they had affembled the people together, made a speech to them to this effect: " We come to preach to you in the " name of Jesus, and require you to subject " yourselves to him, whom God hath made " the Lord of all. He was a great king in " Israel, and did many wonders in that na-" tion, though he was hated and rejected by " them, and at length crucified; but God " rais'd him from the dead on the third day, " and we faw him go into heaven, where he " is enthron'd in most glorious majesty, and " reigns over angels and men. Cast away " therefore all your antient Gods; forfake " your superstitious rites and ceremonies; " believe in him, and fubmit to his govern-" ment; though you get nothing by it in this " world, but perhaps may lose all you have, " he will reward you for it in his heavenly " kingdom." What force, do you think, there would have been in fuch a speech, to persuade the nations far distant from Jerusalem to fall down before him as their fovereign? Would they not have smiled, and said, "What do these bablers mean, to bring us " fuch strange stories from a foreign land? "Why should we acknowledge him to be " our king, whom his own country-men " would not fuffer to rule over them? What " evidence do you bring us that the things " which you relate of him are true? As " you require us to renounce the religion of " our

"our ancestors, and the Gods whom we ferve, produce your credentials from hea"ven." This was likely to have been the most favourable answer they would have met with, in any nation.

But the success of the gospel, without miracles to support it, will appear yet more incredible, if we consider the nature of the doctrine itself, which is so strict and pure, as must necessarily be ungrateful to the corrupt passions of men; their strong prejudices in favour of those religious principles in which they have been educated; that they could not embrace it without renouncing their most valuable present interests, and being expos'd to reproach and persecution; that it was publish'd by plain illiterate men, of no figure, or influence; and made its way in the most ingenious and civiliz'd nations, in opposition to all the learning, power, policy, and malice of the world combin'd against it. These circumstances, I say, render the propagation of the gospel by natural means only still more incredible, and consequently confirm the reality of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost mention'd in the New Testament, which were exercis'd by Christians, according to the accounts they give, at the very time when Christianity first took root, and made such an amazing progress. Can any rational man then refuse to believe that such extraordinary powers were actually communicated, when it appears besides, that there is the most credible

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credible testimony given to these great sacts that can be desir'd in any case, how important so-ever; and the thing in general, viz. the introducing so excellent a religion as the Christian into the world, is worthy the peculiar direction and care of providence? Or if he will not allow this, must he not chuse to believe a thing in a way in which he can never account for it, when he might give an easy and satisfactory solution of it to his own mind? Which is the wildest absurdity, and I may add (though our adversaries perhaps will think it strange to be charged themselves, with what seems in their opinion to belong only to the believers of revelation) enthusiasm.

I HOPE it will not be thought a digression from my main design, if I briefly consider the peculiar weight and force of the argument, from the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, for the truth and divine authority of the Christian religion. And,

i. We find, that our bleffed Saviour, before his death, foretold this great event, and appeal'd to it as a future most glorious and convincing testimony of God in his favour. His words are very determinate and express, and have nothing of the ambiguity of the Heathen oracles: He that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall be do also: and greater works than these shall be do, because I go unto my Father*. And again, nevertheless I tell you

* John xiv. 12.

the truth, it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the comforter (who is the Holy Ghost *) will not come unto you : but if I depart, I will fend him unto you, And when he is come, he will reprove, or convince, the world of fin, because they believe not in me; and of righteousness, of my integrity and innocence, and of the truth and justice of my cause, because I go to my Father +. If therefore this great event happen'd (as hath been already prov'd) according to his prediction, it must be a certain demonstration that he was fent of God. For it can't be imagin'd, that the perfectly wife and righteous governour of the world would fuffer an impostor to produce fuch strong credentials of a divine authority; credentials, which, as they appear'd in consequence of an appeal to him, must be look'd upon as his own testimony; and could not but deceive the most bonest and impartial of his creatures.

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2. These gifts of the Holy Ghost confirm the reality of the miracles, said to be performed by Christ in the course of his own ministry, by shewing undeniably that he was a true prophet; and put the truth of his resurrection out of doubt, by establishing, beyond all exception, the credibility of the Apostles testimony. So that they may justly be look'd upon as the strongest and fullest proofs of the truth and certainty of the Chris-

^{*} John xiv. Ver. 26. + Chap. 16. 7-10.

tian faith, because they render all the other proofs more clear and convincing, with the additional weight of new miracles. But besides this,

3. THERE are some circumstances in the fact itself, which render it the most important and complete evidence of the divinity of our holy religion. For instance, what could be more wonderful, than that illiterate men should give a scheme of natural religion more perfect than any of the wifest of the Philosophers ever did; and that they should be instructed, all of a sudden, in those points which they were before ignorant of, or concerning which they had the common mistakes of their countrymen? And as a judicious writer observes, " There is something in this " gift of wisdom peculiarly fitted to shew, " that the doctrine it confirms came from "God. Works of mere power might be " perform'd by evil spirits; but that evil spi-" rits should furnish men with the know-" ledge and ability to publish to the world " a scheme of doctrine, in all the parts of it, " the best fitted that could be to reform man-" kind, feems perfectly incredible *."

AGAIN, these miraculous powers were communicated to a greater number of perfons than in our Saviour's life-time, or any

^{*} Jeffery's Christianity the perfection of all religions, &c. P. 166.

age of the world before; and that not in one country only, but in different, and far distant, parts of the world. There was likewise a greater variety of them; and the Apostles were not only endued with them themselves, but could confer them upon others, a manifest fign that the power of God constantly attended them. All which circumstances render the proof of Christianity, by this fact, most fure and convincing. For though if a doctrine be worthy of God, and tends to promote the practice of virtue, and the happiness of mankind, one or two real miracles are fufficient to establish its authority; yet in this case, we cannot be so certain of the truth of the facts as when they are more numerous; because 'tis more likely, that one or two men may have a lucky and dextrous way of doing a trick, so as constantly to amuse and astonish the spectators, than a great number, some of whom, 'tis highly probable, will, one time or other, by a bungling performance, discover the fraud; and the same miracles perform'd in various, and far distant, parts of the world, where the actors could not have frequent communication with each other, are less liable to dispute, than such as are confin'd to a particular country.

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To which let me add, that the gift of tongues, is, in itself, of all miracles one of the most plain and unquestionable. For 'tis possible thro' their ignorance of the powers of nature, that men, in many instances, may look

look upon those things as miraculous effects. which are only the fecret operations of natural causes; but we all know the force of nature fo well, that we are fure the knowledge of a language cannot, in a natural way, be attain'd in an instant; because words are arbitrary figns, and therefore can only be understood by learning, and retaining in our memories, the particular ideas they are intended to express; upon which account, it must take up a very considerable space of time, for a man to get himself so well acquainted with several different languages, as to be able to converse easily and familiarly in them all. So that this, in particular, and the other miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, by reason of the peculiar circumstances that attended them, may justly be esteem'd the strongest proof of the truth of our religion; as they are in themfelves most certain and indisputable, and contain the united evidence of miracles, and the accomplishment of most express and determinate prophecies, concerning which there can be no controversy; and as they corroborate, and render more firm and unquestionable, every other part of its external proof. And finally, 'tis to this extraordinary evidence (as we have feen) that we must ascribe the swift and extensive progress of the gospel; which is a kind of standing miracle, to supply in a great measure to us, in these remote times, the want of those other miracles before our eyes, which were common in the first ages of Christianity. THE

THE greatest part of what has been said hitherto relates only to the books of the New Testament which were universally receiv'd; but what must we think of those which were controverted in the most early times, when their authority could be best settled; the epiftle to the Hebrews, for instance, and the epistle of James, the second of Peter, the epiftle of Jude, the second and third of John, and the book of the Revelation? I anfwer, that if the genuineness of these books could not be prov'd, Christianity would be but little affected by it; because those which are uncontestable contain a complete account of the Christian doctrine, and the evidence by which it is supported; nay, if we were only fure of the four Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, these alone would be abundantly fufficient. Nor will the determining this question, which way soever it happens, weaken in any material point the force of what I have already advanc'd, in which I have taken care all along to argue only from those books, the authenticness of which, as far as appears, was never disputed; and consequently of whose being really authentic, we have all the probability that the circumstances of the case will bear; as great at least (and upon some accounts, I think, it has been shewn to be much greater) than there is with respect to any writings besides, of equal antiquity. But there are several things urg'd to prove, that the authority of those books, that were not

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at first universally acknowledg'd, is not so dubious and uncertain as it has been represented; and which, tho they may not amount to an equal probability, may be thought a probability bowever, that they, as well as the other books which were never question'd, are the genuine writings of the Apostles of Christ. The substance of the argument upon this head, I shall give in the words of the late pious and judicious Bishop Blackall*.

r. HE fays, "that there is good evidence from antiquity, that these controverted books were received in the most early times, by those who had the best opportunity of same tissying themselves of the authors, and authority thereof, viz. by those to whom they were sent, and in general by the whole Greek church.

"2. THAT 'tis no wonder, that thefe books (being written either to Christians dispers'd, and consequently only publish'd by giving out copies thereof to some, to be communicated, as there was opportunity, to others; or else to private persons, living perhaps at great distance from the places from which they were sent) were not so easy to be attested, and opon that account were not at first so generally receiv'd, as the others were, which were either written

^{*} Sermons at Boyle's Lecture 4to. Sermon the third; p. 20, 21, 22.

"to particular churches, to which the authors hands, and the messengers that brought them, were well known, or which were first publish'd and receiv'd in the same places where they were written. And,

" 3. THAT even those churches, which "did for some time doubt of the authority of " these books, were persuaded at last to receive them as the authentic writings of the " Apostles, or other inspir'd men. If there-" fore it be suppos'd, that while they doubted " of these books they had reason for their " doubt; that is, that they did it because " they were not as yet fully fatisfied that " they were Apostolical writings, (which the " objectors, I believe, will readily enough " grant) it may be very reasonably presum'd, " that they had afterwards greater reason " to lay afide their doubt; and that when " they did receive them, it was, because " there had been then lately fuch evidence " and attestation given of their being written " by the Apostles, or other inspir'd men, as " they had not heard of before, fuch as they " could not then, with any reason, contra-" dict or gainfay; for ordinarily, a less rea-" fon will persuade a man to take up an o-" pinion at first, than will perfuade him to " go back from an opinion (how weakly fo-" ever grounded) which he has before em-" brac'd and defended."

The fact, as it is here truely stated, is just what it might be presum'd would bappen, with respect to such writings as these. A sufficient account is given why they were not at first universally receiv'd; nay indeed, why it was not to be expected they would be, supposing them to be authentic. But upon this supposition it's natural to believe, that though it might be a considerable time before they could be attested in such a manner, as to give satisfaction to all Christians, they would at length however appear to be genuine; and be receiv'd accordingly (as they really were) even by those churches, who for some time doubted of their authority.

"So that (as the fame author adds) this · objection is fo far from leffening, that it " rather strengthens, the proof we have of " the authority even of those once controverted books; and it is, besides, a very good " corroborating evidence of the authority of all the other books of the New Testament. * For the backwardness of some churches to " receive these controverted books at first " (when they had nothing to object to the matter of them) makes it evident, the " Christians of the first ages were not so very " eafy and credulous as some have represent-" ed them; that they did not so very greedi-" ly swallow any book for divine revelation, " that contain'd a great many miracles, mix'd " with a few good morals, without making " due

" due inquiry concerning the author, and the authority thereof. But on the contra-" ry, their being so hard to be persuaded to receive these controverted books for some " time, while they wanted, as they thought, " fufficient attestation, (although the doctrine " of them was in all points agreeable to the " doctrine of the other books which they " had before receiv'd; their being so hard, " I say, to receive these books) of the autho-" rity of which there nevertheless really was " fuch evidence, as they themselves, after hav-" ing well weigh'd and confider'd it, declar'd " themselves satisfied with, gives very good " ground to believe, that they had, from the beginning, fuch evidence as was without exception of the authority of all those other " books (that is, of much the greatest part) of the New Testament, which were never controverted, which were from the first, " and with universal consent, receiv'd by all " Christian churches. For if there had not " been very undeniable evidence of their be-" ing the genuine writings of the Apostles, or other inspired men, there would certainly " have been the same doubt and controversy " concerning them, that there once was concerning thefe."

But supposing the authority of all the books of the New Testament to be fully establish'd; how can we be sure, that they are transmitted down to us just as they were written? That, having been often transcrib'd, they

have not been corrupted, and alter'd very much by the ignorance or carelesiness of the transcribers? Or, that several, even material, passages are not curtail'd and mangled, and others interpolated by the different parties of Christians, in the heat of their oppofition to each other? By which means the face of Christianity may be vastly chang'd, and render'd quite another thing from what it was in the beginning. " If no court of " judicature, tho in a thing of small mo-" ment, will admit of a copy, tho taken " from the original, without oath made by " a difinterested person of his having com-" par'd it; because the least mistake, a va-" rious pointing, a parenthesis, a letter mis-" plac'd may alter the fense; how can we " absolutely depend in things of the greatest " moment, on voluminous writings, which " have been so often transcrib'd by men, " who never faw the original; (as none, " even of the most early writers, pretend " they did) and men too, who even in the " earliest times, if we may judge by the " number of forg'd passages, and even forg'd " books, would scruple no pious frauds *." And accordingly, there are actually, in the present copies of the New Testament, no less than 30000 various readings, which this author (as all others of the same stamp) frequently mentions as a very formidable thing; which shews, they think, plainly, that these

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 324.

Christian revelation defended. 149 copies are in fact so very corrupt and erroneus, that they are not to be depended on.

I THINK it very strange, that ingenious men, who are able to entertain the world much better, should tire it with flale objections, which have been fo often confider'd, and thoroughly answer'd; and particularly, that the author of Christianity &cc. should publish a large book, (that from the great expectations that were rais'd concerning it, one might justly imagine, would contain fomething new and decifive upon these points) in which old difficulties are reviv'd, without letting his readers know that any folutions of them have ever been attempted, and what those folutions are; or endeavouring to shew that they are weak and insufficient. Such a conduct must be nauseous to those who are already well-vers'd in controversies of this kind, and looks too much like a defign to miflead the injudicious and unwary. And after all, what do these objections amount to? Why, to a possibility of forgery, but nothing at all of that kind prov'd; a possibility of corruption, but no one material corruption, interpolation, or omission pointed at, which has not been discover'd, and consequently, being known, can be of no differvice to Christianity; and at this rate all the writings of antiquity may be forg'd, or corrupted; 30000 various readings, the common fate of books that have been often transcrib'd, but none of them shewn to be of fuch moment, as to disguise, or alter, L 3

any important doctrine of the Christian religion: so that they would signify nothing, if they arose to twice that number.

Bur there are feveral things that make it highly improbable, notwithstanding the inclination of some of the first Christians to pious frauds, that there are any important alterations and corruptions in the books of the New Testament: and these, I make no doubt, will have great weight, fince there is nothing but bare suspicion on the other side. We have no direct reason to think they are corrupted, and feveral very confiderable probabilities that they are not. And if these are sufficient to fatisfy a fair inquirer; especially, if the copies of the New Testament are found to be as pure as those of other antient writings which are depended upon, and are not thought to be so perverted in any particular passages as to create confuhon, or at all to hinder, but that the general sense of them may be easily understood; it matters not, whether, according to present establish'd forms, they would be admitted as evidence in a court of judicature. For it may be great perverseness and folly in private persons, in the common affairs of life. and, I think likewise, with respect to religion, in which, as it is the most important concern of mankind, probabilities ought always to determine, not to believe things, and form their conduct accordingly upon fuch proofs, as may not (perhaps for wife reasons) be

Christian revelation defended. 151 be allow'd to decide in the administration of public justice.

THE only question in short is this, whether men ought not to be guided by real probabilities, without inquiring at all, how far they are admitted in some particular circumstances; and whether such probabilities may not be sufficient to convince the judgment of their own minds, as will not fometimes pass in courts of judicature? If this be denied, mankind must in most cases sit still, believe nothing, and do nothing; they must drop their most laudable and useful designs; and all the great affairs of the world will be at a stand. And if it be allow'd, (and nothing in the world, I think, can be more plain) the next thing to be confider'd is, whether, the authority of the books of the New Testament being already establish'd, there be not a sufficient probability to persuade us, that they are convey'd down to our times fo pure and uncorrupt, as that all Christians may from thence get a perfect idea of the Christian doctrine? If this likewise be proved, the necessary consequence from the whole will be, that it is highly reasonable for us to receive them as the rule of our religious behaviour, when we can advance nothing to the contrary but possibilities, and ill-grounded suspicions; and that the methods of courts of judicature (which infift frequently upon clearer proof, than is necessary barely to convince men of the truth

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Bur there are several things that make it highly improbable, notwithstanding the inclination of some of the first Christians to pious frauds, that there are any important alterations and corruptions in the books of the New Testament: and these, I make no doubt, will have great weight, fince there is nothing but bare suspicion on the other side. We have no direct reason to think they are corrupted, and feveral very considerable probabilities that they are not. And if these are sufficient to fatisfy a fair inquirer; especially, if the copies of the New Testament are found to be as pure as those of other antient writings which are depended upon, and are not thought to be so perverted in any particular passages as to create confuhon, or at all to hinder, but that the general sense of them may be easily understood; it matters not, whether, according to present establish'd forms, they would be admitted as evidence in a court of judicature. For it may be great perverseness and folly in private persons, in the common affairs of life, and, I think likewise, with respect to religion, in which, as it is the most important concern of mankind, probabilities ought always to determine, not to believe things, and form their conduct accordingly upon fuch proofs, as may not (perhaps for wife reasons)

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of facts) ought to have no influence or weight at all with us, in the present inquiry.*

But to come more directly to the point. Let us examine if there be really any ground to suspect that the text of the New Testament is so corrupt, as to render its authority precatious and doubtful; or whether all appearances do not rather favour the contrary supposition. And,

* I thought what is offer'd above a sufficient answer to the author of Christianity's reasoning from the practice of courts of judicature, and therefore did not trouble my felf to examine any farther; but I have since been inform'd by a very ingenious friend, who is thoroughly acquainted with the methods of proceeding in these courts, that 'tis a great mistake to say, that they will not admit of a copy, tho taken from the original, without oath made by a difinterested person of his having coma par'd it;" and that the true state of the case is this. Where the original is extant, or there is a person living who has compar'd the copy with the original, a court of justice will expect, either that the original itself be produc'd, or else the oath of the person, who has compar'd the copy with it, that he believes it to be a true one; and that for this very good reason, because Such proof may be had. But in cases, where it appears that the original is lost, as by fire, or any other accident; or where a deed is of such great antiquity, as that it may reasonably be suppos'd to be lost; and a copy is produc'd of such antiquity, that none who could be witnesses to the comparing it with the original can be suppos'd to be living; such copy is constantly admitted as evidence, without any cash of its having been compar'd. So that (as he adds) our author's argument, drawn from the practice of courts of judicature, can never serve his purpose, unless the original writings of the New Testament were fill extant, or at least had been in being so very lately, that some perfons, now alive, might be suppos'd to have compar'd our prefent copies with them; but as the case really flands, is mon-Aroully absurd, since it requires what is, in its own nature, impossible, supposing the present copies to be perfectly genuine and exact.

Where as the author of Christianity &c. infinuates, that the writings of the New Testament are not much to be depended on, because they have been so often transcrib'd; it may be replied, that some of the copies we now have are of great antiquity, particularly the Alexandrian, which was made so early as the fourth century, and so might be taken from some at least of the originals themselves, which, Tertullian says, were to be seen in his time; or else, from copies that were taken directly from the originals. However, let what will come of this, we have as good presumptive proof of the integrity of these writings as can reasonably be desired.

For if we look into the books themselves, we shall find one uniform consistent scheme throughout the whole; the same entire harmony and agreement in all the parts, as might be expected, if they were carefully and faithfully transmitted down to our times; and none of those contrarieties, and clashing accounts of sacts or doctrines, as must have been unavoidable to a great degree, if they had been alter'd and perverted in material passages.

And,

Besides this internal mark of purity, which, upon the supposition of gross corruption, is not to be accouted for, there are several other circumstances, that, taken all together, afford a very considerable probability; viz.

viz. that these books were, from the beginning, read in all Christian assemblies; and frequently quoted by the earliest Christian writers; that many copies of them were taken, and dispers'd in various parts of the world; and that they were very foon translated into feveral languages: fo that if we suppose that some copies might be corrupted, we cannot believe that the corruption could be universal, without infinuating, what is too mean and scandalous to serve any cause, that the whole Christian world concurr'd in the cheat. We ought rather to argue (as being a more just, as well as charitable and generous way of reasoning) that as all honest men are greatly concern'd for the purity of religion upon which their bigbest interests depend, 'tis utterly improbable fuch a thing could be effected; and to increase the improbability, let it be consider'd, that there were different fects of Christians who narrowly watch'd each other, and would have been ready to detect and expose all impostures of this kind; or if it was possible, that when the Christians had got the temporal power into their hands, that party which was uppermost might corrupt some copies, and destroy all the rest; besides, that this is but barely possible, but not at all credible, confidering the great number of copies that were dispers'd every where, and the variety of translations; a thing of this nature could not have happen'd without being loudly complain'd of; it must have put the whole Christian world in an uproar, and given the enemies of Christianity a vait

wast advantage against it; some account of which, as of other confusions and disturbances in the church of less moment, would undoubtedly have been preserved in some or other of the writings of those ages which are still extant, composed by men of different parties, and interests.

AGAIN, we know that fome corruptions have been detected, which confirms the main of the preceding argument, and shews clearly, that there was far from being an inclination among Christians, univerfally, to countenance and support such base and knavish designs; and the same bonest disposition, the same capacity, and diligence, would probably have discover'd and expos'd all such frauds. And,

FINALLY, our present copies agree, in all points of importance, with all the most antient versions; and with the numerous quosations that were made from the books of the New Testament by the most early Christian writers. So that upon the whole, we have stronger evidence of their purity, than we can have with respect to any other books of equal antiquity, in which, it was not so much the concern of all virtuous persons to prevent corruptions; which are not quoted by so many other authors; and of which copies and translations were not so frequent, nor so widely dispers'd.

Bur notwithstanding all these seeming probabilities, is there any arguing against plain fact? Are there not " 30000 various read-" ings in the copies of the New Testament, as " it stands at present?" not to mention, " in-" numerable copies that have been loft, " which, no doubt, had their different read-" ings *" also. And does not this prove great unskilfulness or negligence in the transcribers at least, if not wilful corruption? To this several things are replied, viz. that the various readings rather tend to fettle the true text, than confound and pervert it; --- that those writings, of which there are the fewest copies, are the most corrupt of any, and cannot be amended; —that there have been more copies and translations of the New Testament than of any other antient book whatfoever, and consequently, it is reasonable to expect there should be more variations; — but that in proportion to the number, there are full as many differences in the copies of the purelt authors of antiquity; -- and that the most corrupt copies we have are, in all effential points, sufficiently exact to give men a just notion of Christianity, and consequently to answer the end for which those writings were originally defign'd. But let us hear what is faid upon this head by one, who will be allow'd to be as accurate a judge in controversies of this kind, as any age has produc'd.

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 324.

"IF (says this most learned author) there had been but one manuscript of the Greek Testament, at the restoration of learning about two centuries ago; then we had had no various readings at all. And would the text be in a better condition, than now we have 30000? So far from that; that in the best single copy extant, we should have had hundreds of faults, and some omissions irreparable. Besides that the suspicions of fraud and soul play would have been inincreas'd immensly.

"IT is good therefore, you'll allow, to have more authors than one; and another MS to join with the first would give more authority, as well as security. Now chuse that second where you will, there shall be a thousand variations from the first; and yet half or more of the faults shall still remain in them both.

"ATHIRD therefore, and so a fourth, and still on, are desirable; that by a joint and mutual help all the faults may be mended ed: some copy preserving the true reading in one place, and some in another. And yet the more copies you call to affishance, the more do the various readings multiply upon you: every copy having its peculiar slips, though in a principal passage or two it do singular service. And this is fact, not

" only in the New Testament, but in all antient books whatever.

"'Tis a good providence, and a great bleffing, that so many manuscripts of the New Testament are still amongst us; some procur'd from Egypt, others from Asia, others found in the Western churches: for the very distances of places, as well as numbers of the books, demonstrate that there could be no collusion, nor altering, nor interpolating one copy by another, nor all by any of them.

" In profane authors (as they are called) " whereof one manuscript only had the luck " to be preserv'd, as Velleius Paterculus a-" mong the Latins, and Hefychius among the " Greeks; the faults of the scribes are found " fo numerous, and the defects beyond all " redress, that notwithstanding the pains of " the learnedst and acutest critics for two " whole centuries, these books are still, and " are like to continue a mere heap of errors. "On the contrary, where the copies of any " author are numerous, though the various " readings always increase in proportion; " there the text, by an accurate collation of " them made by skilful and judicious hands, " is ever the more correct, and comes nearer " to the true words of the author.

"TERENCE is now in one of the best conditions of any of the classic writers;

" the oldest and best copy of him is now in " the Vatican library, which comes nearest " to the poet's own hand; but even that has " hundreds of errors, most of which may be " mended out of other exemplars, that are " otherwise more recent, and of inferior va-" lue. I myself have collated several; and " do affirm, that I have feen 20000 various " lections in that little author, not near fo big as the whole New Testament: and am " morally fure, that if half the number of " manuscripts were collated for Terence with " that niceness and minuteness which has been " used in twice as many for the New Testa-" ment, the number of the variations would " amount to above 50000.

" In the manuscripts of the New Testament the variations have been noted with a relie gious, not to fay superstitious exactness. " Every difference in spelling, in the smallest " particle or article of speech, in the very " order or collation of words without real " change, has been studiously registred. Nor " has the text only been ranfack'd, but all " the antient versions, the Latin Vulgate, " Italic, Æthiopic, Arabic, Coptic, Armenian, " Gothic, and Saxon; nor these only, but all " the dispers'd citations of the Greek and Latin Fathers in a course of 500 years. "What wonder then, if with all this fcru-" pulous fearch in every hole and corner, the " varieties rise to 30000? when in all antient books of the same bulk, whereof the " MSS

"MSS are numerous, the variations are as many, or more; and yet no versions to fwell the reckoning.

" THE editors of profane authors do not " use to trouble their readers, or risk their " own reputation, by an useless list of every " fmall flip committed by a lazy or ignorant What is thought commendable in an edition of scripture, and has the name " of fairness and fidelity, would in them be " deem'd impertinence and trifling. Hence " the reader not vers'd in antient MSS is " deceiv'd into an opinion, that there were " no more variations in the copies, than what " the editor has communicated. Whereas, " if the like scrupulousness was observ'd in " registring the smallest changes in prophane " authors, as is allow'd, nay, requir'd in fa-" cred; the now formidable number of 30000 " would appear a very trifle.

"'TIS manifest, that books in verse are not near so obnoxious to variations, as prose: the transcriber, if he is not wholly ignowrant and stupid, being guided by the measures; and hindred from such alterations, as do not fall in with the laws of numbers. And yet even in poets, the variations are so very many, as can hardly be conceived without use and experience. In the late edition of Tibullus, by the learned Mr. Broukhuise, you have a register of various lections in the close of that book; where

" you may fee at the first view that there " are as many as the lines. The same is visi-" ble in Plautus, fet out by Paraus. I my-" felf, during my travels, have had the opor portunity to examine several MSS of the " poet Manilius; and can affure you, that " the variations I have met with are twice as " many as all the lines of the book.-Add " likewise, that the MSS here used were few " in comparison: and then do you imagine, " what the lections would amount to, if ten " times as many (the case of Dr. Mill) were " accurately examin'd. And yet in these " and all other books, the text is not made " more precarious on that account, but more " certain and authentic.

"-IF a corrupt line, or dubious reading " chances to intervene, it does not darken " the whole context, nor make an author's " opinion, or his purpose, precarious. Terence, " for instance, has as many variations, as any " book whatever in proportion to its bulk; " and yet with all its interpolations, omif-" fions, additions, or gloffes (chuse the worst " of them on purpole) you cannot deface " the contrivance and plot of one play; no, " not of one fingle scene; but its sense, design, " and subserviency to the last issue and con-" clusion, shall be visible and plain thorough " all the mist of various lections. And so it " is with the facred text; make your 30000 " as many more, if numbers of copies can " ever reach that fum: all the better to a 46 know-M

" knowing and ferious reader, who is there-" by more richly furnish'd to select what he " fees genuine. But even put them into the " hands of a knave or a fool: and yet with " the most finistrous and absurd choice, he " shall not extinguish the light of any one " chapter, nor difguise Christianity, but that " every feature of it will be the same *." I make no doubt but that the reader will eafily excuse this long quotation, as it sets the matter of the various readings in so clear a light, and shews that there is not the least difficulty in it; though at the same time, he must be at a loss what to think of the fairness and modesty of those writers, who without being able, or pretending to be able, to confute any part of it, still go on in the old track, and think to bear down all before them by confident and groundless infinuations.

THE author of Christianity (among the rest) has not said one word to all this; only he seems to think it not sufficient, because one or two various readings [in the New Testament] where most things are own'd to be of the greatest moment, may be of that consequence, as to destroy the design of the whole book †." To which I answer, that may-be's go for nothing at all; and that it would be time enough to reply to this, when he has produc'd any readings of

^{*} Remarks on a discourse of Free-Thinking, by Phileleutherus Lipsiensis; p. 64 — 68. and p. 76. edit. 5th. † P. 325.

fuch great consequence. However, to shew that there is nothing in the objection, let it be consider'd, that various readings, which destroy the whole defign of revelation, must be such as pervert some effential doctrines of it. Suppose then, that in two, or three, places, the text of the New Testament was so corrupted as to affert, " that God is not wife, just and good; " that Jesus is not the Christ; that men " might practife idolatry; or deceive, and " persecute each other; or that there is no " future state," and the like; such readings could not, and ought not to be admitted as the true readings, contrary to the general and most evident strain of the revelation: but every one would naturally look upon them as the errors of transcribers, and not as the original words of the writers, to whose sentiments they not only bear no resemblance, but are a manifest contradiction. And indeed if we judge otherwise, 'tis impossible for us to find the fense of any author whatever. So that if men reason fairly, and as they ought to do, one or two various readings cannot destroy the defign of the whole New Testament; because readings of that importance being directly contrary to the plain and unquestionable design of it, it must be as probable, as a thing of that nature can be, that they are falle readings.

But admitting the credibility of the gospel-history to be sufficiently establish'd, and that we have all the probability we can de-M 2 fire,

fire, that the books of the new Testament are convey'd down to us pure in all material passages, how can the common people upon rational grounds be fatisfied of these things? "Religion either does not concern the ma-" jority, as being incapable of forming a " judgment about it; or it must carry such " internal marks of its truth, as men of " mean capacity are able to discover: or else " notwithstanding the infinite variety of re-" ligions, all who do not understand the ori-" ginal languages their traditional religions " are written in, which is all mankind, " a very few excepted, are alike bound " in all places to pin their faith on their " priest, and believe in men, who have an " interest to deceive them; and who have " feldom fail'd to do fo, when occasion " ferves.

"CAN people, if incapable by their rea"fon to distinguish truth from falshood,
"have any thing more to plead for the
"truth of their religion, than that they be"lieve it to be the true religion; because their
"priests, who are hir'd to maintain it, tell
"them it was a long while ago reveal'd to
"certain persons, who, as they, on their
"priestly words, assure them, were too wise
"to be impos'd on themselves; and too ho"nest to impose on others: and that no
"change could have been made in their re"ligion in after-times; the care men have of
"their

" their own fouls, as well as their natural " affection for posterity, obliging them from " generation to generation, to hand down " their religion just as they receiv'd it: and " that it was morally impossibe innovations " should creep in, fince it would be the " highest folly in any to attempt to introduce " new doctrines, as a tradition receiv'd from " their ancestors; when all must know they " had receiv'd no such tradition. As this is " all, the bulk of mankind, if they are not " capable of judging from the doctrines them-" felves of their truth, can fay for their re-" ligion; fo they, in all places, make use of " this argument; and with equal confidence " aver, that, though all other traditionary " religions are full of gross falshoods, and " most absurd notions, which their priests " impudently impose on them as divine " truths; yet our own priests are such faith-" ful representers of things, that one may " as well question the truth of all history, " as the truth of things believ'd on their " authority.

"This boasted argument, in which men of all religions so much triumph, if it proves any thing, would prove there never was, nor could be any false religion, either in whole, or part; because truth being before falshood, and mens ancestors having once possess'd it, no change could afterward ever happen: whereas on the contrary, though there have been at times M 3 "great

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" great numbers of traditional religions, yet as far as it appears, no one of them has long remain'd the same; at least, in such points as were merely founded on tradition.

" I SEE no middle, but that we must " either own, that there are fuch internal " marks fix'd to every part of the true relif' gion, as will enable the bulk of mankind " to distinguish it from all false religions; or elfe, that all traditionary religions are " upon a level: fince those, who, in every country, are hir'd to maintain them, will " not fail to affert, they have all external " marks; fuch as uninterrupted traditions, se incontested miracles, confession of adversaries, " number of proselytes, agreement among themse felves; and all those other external argu-" ments, that the Papists and Mahometans " fet so high a value on. In this case, what s' can the common people do, who under-" stand not a word of the language, their " religion, and its external proofs are writ in, " but be of the religion in which they are " educated; especially, if nothing is suffer'd " to be publish'd, which may, in the least, " tend to make them question its truth; and " all other religions are represented as full of " the groffest absurdities "." Now in answer to this, which I have not abridg'd, that the Christian revelation defended. 167 reader may see this author's reasoning in its full strength, I observe,

THAT the defenders of revelation have no reason to affert, that a traditional religion is to be receiv'd upon the mere foot of authority; but there are certain internal characters absolutely necessary in order to its being a divine revelation, which men of mean capacity are able to discover. For instance, the principal defign of all reveal'd religion must be to restore and establish natural; to give mankind just and worthy notions of God, and ascertain the principles and obligations of morality; and to promote the true rational perfection and bappiness of human nature: and all its positive institutions, and peculiar dostrines, it is reasonable to expect, will be intended as helps and motives to virtue. In general therefore the people are capable, by their reason, of judging whether any particular traditional revelation be worthy of God; they are not requir'd to believe it implicitly even upon the authority of miracles; and confequently, a tradition of miracles is not all they have to urge in support of it.

But the proving that the peculiar doctrines of revelation are not repugnant to reason, nor unworthy of God, is only an argument that they may be true, and not a sufficient soundation upon which to conclude they are really true. Here then comes in the attestation of the miracles, to convince mankind that what M 4 their

their reason approves, as worthy of God, actually proceeds from him. And therefore it must be own'd, that the common people cannot rationally believe the fruth of any traditional revelation, that contains doctrines which reason could not discover, unless they can have full fatisfaction, that the histories they have of fuch doctrines, and of the miracles wrought in confirmation of them, are authentic, and credible. So that the question to be resolv'd is in short this; whether, as they are capable of discerning the internal marks of the truth of Christianity, they are not likewise able to form a rational judgment concerning the credibility of the gospel-history, and its conveyance down to our times without any material alteration, or corruption.

If the common people can judge of fuch kind of proofs (as uncontested miracles must establish the truth of any doctrines that are agreeable to reason, and adapted to advance true goodness, and which belong to what is upon the whole a most useful and perfect scheme of morality; and consequently against which, as very fit to be parts of a divine rewelation, no objection of weight can be form'd) they may have fufficient reason to believe the traditional religion in which they are educated; though there are not " fuch internal " marks fix'd to every part of it, as alone " will enable them to distinguish it from all false religions." It will indeed have this general internal mark to distinguish it from all false false religions, that the wife and beneficent defign of its author will plainly appear in the whole frame of it, and that even its peculiar principles will stand the test of reason; but though they may be such as reason cannot condemn, and which, if true, must have a confiderable influence upon our moral conduct, 'tis most evident (as has been already hinted) that this of itself does not prove they are true: fo that fomething, besides internal marks, may be absolutely necessary to establish the credit of a revelation that is worthy of God; or in other words, of a revelation, which, after the strictest inquiry, we may apprehend it to be agreeable to bis perfections to communicate to mankind. And farther, if the bulk of mankind are able to judge of the authenticness and credibility of antient histories, it must be a great mistake of the author of Christianity &c. that if such internal marks are not fix'd to every part " of the true religion, as will enable them " to distinguish it from all false religions, all " traditionary religions are upon the level." For let " those, who in every country are " hir'd to maintain them, be ever so confi-" dent in afferting, that they have all external " marks; fuch as uninterrupted traditions, " incontested miracles, confession of adversaries, " number of proselytes, agreement among them-" felves, and all those other external argu-" ments, that the Papists, and (as he says) the " Mahometans fet so high a value on;" the common people being able, as will presently be thewn,

shewn, upon a view of what is offer'd on both fides of the question, to distinguish between true and false pretences, are no more under a necessity of being impos'd upon, or of embracing a traditional religion implicitly, than they are of believing without evidence in points of the most pure and abstract reasoning, which do not at all depend upon tradition.

ALL this shew of argument therefore is plainly founded upon the supposition, that the generality must take a traditional religion entirely from the authority of their priests, and that this is all they have to plead for the truth of it: but as we have only the author's bare affertion for this, it will undoubtedly go for nothing. It must pass however for a specimen of a very extraordinary kind of reasoning, first to lay it down as a fundamental principle, that if men are incapable by their reason, without the testimony of miracles, to discover every part of a traditional religion, " all who do not understand " the original languages their traditional re-" ligions are written in, which is all man-" kind, a very few excepted, are alike bound " in all places, to pin their faith on their " priests;" and to think this sufficiently prov'd by asking, what " they can have more to " plead for the truth of their religion, than " that they believe it to be true, because their " priests tell them so and so;" and then upon fuch a flender foundation to declare, that " all

"all traditionary religions are upon a level;" and that the common people have nothing to do "but to be of the religion in which they "are educated." The confequence would indeed be just, if the premises were true; but there happens unluckily to be this great desect, that the premises, which are the very things in dispute, are taken for granted; and that the author of Christianity &c. seems to take the putting a question how a thing can be, to be an argument that it cannot be; which, it must be allow'd, is a very expeditious and easy way of deciding all controversies,

I PROCEED now to answer the question directly, how the common people may be perfuaded of the truth of facts, the knowledge of which depends upon tradition; of the authenticness, for instance, of the books of the New Testament, the credibility of the accounts contain'd in them, and that they have not fuffer'd any material alteration in the conveyance. That this is the truth of the case has been largely proved; the only thing therefore that remains to be shewn is, that the people are capable of feeing this proof. And what is it that is necessary in order to this? Why only, that they have proper materials upon which to form a right judgment, and a capacity of judging upon those materials.

To obtain the first, let them set thernselves to examine the truth of Christianity with

with an bonest, attentive, impartial mind, and read carefully what is offer'd on both fides, for it, and against it; and then, if what has been hitherto written is sufficient to determine the controversy, they must know all that is necessary to be known, in order to the making a rational judgment about it. Upon this supposition they know as much as the writers themselves, who may be presum'd to have deliver'd their fentiments in the fullest and firongest manner they were able; and consequently have as extensive a view of the fubject, as men of learning, and much superior improvements. Nor is it necessary to their attaining fufficient skill in this controversy, that they read every thing which has been written upon it, or may be written hereafter, (which would be too laborious and voluminous an inquiry for the generality of mankind, an inquiry that their opportunities and circumstances in life would not perhaps admit of) for as the subject has been often handled, there are scarce any two writers of note but contain all that is material. Thus far then, I think, the case is very plain, viz. that if the dispute can be decided by what the learned have written, and consequently by what they know about it, the common people, who by reading may be furnish'd with all their ideas, must be able to form as rational a judgment; provided the point itself to be determin'd be not above their capacities: Nay, 'tis not at all absurd to suppose, that they may often make a truer judgment; because they may purfue

pursue their inquiries with minds more free from prejudice, and better disposed to allow every argument its proper weight than those, who, with their greater abilities, have too frequently strong attachments to a particular scheme, make it their business to puzzle and confound what they cannot answer, and dispute not for truth but victory.

Now what is there in the present case, that is above the capacity of the bulk of mankind? Are not all, who will exercise their reason and examine impartially, able to judge, upon a view of the arguments on both fides, whether the books of the New Testament are prov'd to be forgeries; or whether it be prov'd on the contrary, that they were constantly ascrib'd to the authors whose names they bear; that they are supported by the same undisputed tradition as other antient writings which are univerfally allow'd to be genuine; and consequently, that the rejecting them as spurious destroys the authority of all antient histories, which stand upon no better foundation? If they are unable to judge, upon having the whole evidence before them, whether these, which are plain matters of fact, are prov'd or no, they can judge of no facts whatever. And what confusion would such a notion of the common people occasion, if it was brought into civil life.

AND if the people can judge of the proofs which are offer'd for the authenticness of the books

books of the New Testament; it will sure be trifling with the understandings of men to attempt to shew, that they are able to judge when it is sufficiently prov'd that historians are credible, and whether the objections which are made against their testimony are strong enough to fet it afide. For being convinc'd that these accounts were written by eye-witnesses; if they cannot judge whether it be prov'd, that eye-witnesses in the relation of fuch facts could not, confidering all circumstances, be imposed on themselves; and that they were men of fuch integrity (demonstrated by the general course of their behaviour, by their attesting these things in opposition to their worldly interests, and chusing ALL not only to fuffer, but die, rather than retract their testimony) as cannot rationally be sufpected of a defign to impose on others; I say, if they are incapable of judging when this is fully prov'd, the consequence will indeed be, that they ought never to believe any thing upon testimony, and what would become of the world if this was true? All commerce between man and man must ima mediately be suspended, and the design of their focial nature be entirely defeated.

The same may be said with respect to corruptions; the common people must be capable of discerning, when they see what is offer'd on both sides, whether this charge is prov'd or not; whether any instances of gross cor-

corruption are produced, and clearly shewn to be such, or the whole of what is advanc'd be only surmise and conjecture, contrary to all the probabilities of things; otherwise, they cannot be judges of probability in any case; and consequently, considering in how few of the affairs of life higher evidence can be had, their reason must be in a manner use-less.

So far am I in my judgment from thinking it of service to the Christian religion, that the liberty of writing against it should be at all restrain'd, that I would have it encourag'd to the utmost; and cannot think of a better method to fix even the vulgar more firmly in the belief of the gospel-history, than reading the objections of its adversaries. This, I am persuaded, will give a greater weight to the arguments which are urg'd to establish its authenticness, credibility, and purity, in the most excellent defences of Christianity. Let them read, for instance, Christianity as old as the creation, &c. or any other book where the fame things are faid in a much narrower compass, and when they find, instead of direct proofs of forgery with respect to the writings of the New Testament, only groundless suspicion, and infinuations that there may be forgery, and that none of the writers on this fide of the question are so hardy as to pretend, that the authenticness of far the greatest part of them was ever disputed in the most early ages; when they find what trifling things are objected

objected against the capacity and integrity of the gospel-historians, and how they strain and rack their invention to raise difficulties. which, after all, amount to nothing but to destroy the credibility of the most unexceptionable testimony, and make men distrust their very senses; and that as there is nothing of moment urg'd against the authenticness, and credibility of the books, there is not the least probable evidence given that they are corrupted in any material branches of Christian doctrine, nor a fingle corruption of consequence pointed at, but what was before discover'd by the honesty and diligence of Christian writers, which is a strong prefumption that these writings are, in general, pure and entire; and finally, when they find, that all the stir which has been made about various readings comes to no more than this, that there are the same differences in the copies of the New Testament as are to be found in the copies of the purest authors of antiquity; and that there is not fo much as an attempt made to prove, that these differences are of any great importance (only perhaps they may be, but these writers themselves do not take upon them to say they are) or that they obscure, disguise, and pervert any essential doctrine of the Christian revelation; when, I fay, the people find, that this is all the most ingenious and subtil opposers of Christianity have to offer against its authority, (which is indeed nothing more than may be urg'd against the authority of all antient books) they will, and ought to conclude, that that its great facts stand upon so sure a foundation as cannot be shaken. 'Tis natural for them to reason thus, that if any thing more material could be advanced, men of their skill would undoubtedly be able to produce it; and they cannot imagine that 'tis for want of an inclination to make a home thrust, that they deal in possibilities instead of direct and positive proofs, but because they know they have no other arguments to make use of. The people can have no ground to suspect, that the adversaries of their religion have any more important objections in reserve, than those which they have already urg'd. For tho the terror of penal laws (which are but weak supports of a false religion, and unnecessary to guard the true, that being never fo well defended, as when it is left to make its way by the force of its own evidence) I say, tho the terror of penal laws may restrain them from making a direct and open attack upon Christianity, which is the establish'd religion; experience teaches us, that they are not at a loss for ways, in which to say the freest things both against the miracles, and doctrine, of Christ and his Apostles. And it may be justly question'd, whether by this artful infinuating method, in which there is more room for evasion, and men cannot be kept fo strictly to the rules of close reasoning, they have not done more prejudice to the Christian cause, than they could, had they been allowed to throw off all disguises, and argue professedly against it; and consequently, whether

ther this be not the method they choose to proceed in? But be that as it will, it can't be expected that the people should suspend their belief of reveal'd religion, till they are fure no more objections can, or will be made to it: for at this rate they can fix on nothing, but must indulge to eternal scepticism. It is not their business to concern themselves about what may one time, or other, or perhaps never, be offer'd; but to be determin'd by the evidence they have. And therefore if Christianity, upon a ferious examination of the reafons on both fides, appears to their minds to be a rational institution, and supported by fufficient evidence, they ought to believe and submit to it; and continue to acknowledge it as a divine religion, till these stronger arguments, it any fuch there be, are produced, and convince their judgments of the contrary.

Thus have I shewn, that the common people, if they will give themselves time to read, and consider, need not take the Christian revelation implicitly from their ancestors, or their priests; but are capable of discerning both the intrinsic goodness of the doctrine, and its external proofs. It must be own'd, that the difficulty is much greater with respect to those persons who cannot read, or want proper opportunities and advantages for making inquiries of this kind themselves: but however, even these are so far from being, universally, under a necessity of implicit faith, that very many of them, at least, may, if they

they will, form their judgment upon a rational conviction. Of the intrinsic excellency of a revelation they are all judges; and in order to judge of its external proofs, let them find out a person that is well skill'd in this controversy, and of whose veracity they are well affured (and fuch an one, it cannot be denied, but many of the most ignorant and illiterate vulgar, if they exercise the same care and prudence as they would in chusing a person, to advise and manage for them in the common affairs of life, may eafily find) and let him lay before them fairly and impartially the fubstance of the argument on both fides, upon which they may maturely deliberate and determine. 'Tis evident, that in this case they do not take the judgment of another about a point of speculation, but only his representation of a matter of fact: they do not trust to his understanding, but his integrity.

If it be said, that they trust his understanding so far, viz. to give them a judicious state of the argument in its sull strength: I answer, that the People may indeed make a wrong choice; but, as I hinted before, if they are sincerely desirous to be rightly inform'd, there are vast numbers, to whom t will be no great difficulty to pitch upon a person whose capacity cannot be disputed; so that there will be but little danger of their being imposed on, if they can rely upon his bonesty. However, for their greater security they may

apply to several, and try how far their accounts agree. And let it but be allowed, that persons who have such opportunities, and act with that prudence and caution which the importance of the inquiry deferves, may have as good reason to be satisfied in this case, as they have in other matters of the greatest moment, wherein they depend upon the information of men of known abilities, and unquestionable veracity, we defire no more. For this fupposes, that they may have a sufficient probability of the truth of the Christian religion; fuch a probability as leaves no rational ground of doubt; and which it is always, and justly, thought their wisdom to be determined by, in all other affairs of consequence. After all it must be own'd, that this method may be attended with some difficulties, but, I think, not with greater than men often meet with, and get fuccessfully through, in the management of their fecular concerns; and with respect to those who cannot inquire for themfelves, and likewise want opportunities to get proper information from others, I make no scruple to allow, that their belief of a traditional revelation must be implicit; but yet it may be of great use to them, if they have frequent opportunities to hear it read and explain'd, by fixing in their minds the principles of natural religion, and giving them fuch just notions of morality, as, 'tis probable, they would never have attained by their own private reflections.

I HAVE all along taken it for granted (because it is the true and natural state of things which God defigned) that the common people will read, and confider, and make use of those belps which are in their power, in order to understand the proofs of the truth and purity of a traditional religion. And 'tis sufficient, that if they do this they may form a rational judgment of these points; and as much as can be faid with respect to natural religion itself. For let the religion of nature be ever so plain to the diligent and impartial inquirer, men will as necessarily be ignorant of that, if they are indolent, careless, and unthinking, if they neglect the use of their reafon, or fuffer it to be darkned by superstition and prejudice, as of the evidences of an external revelation. The knowledge of the one is no more to be obtained without proper reflection, than of the other; and a careful examination will discover both. Nay, I can't help thinking, and appeal to every man who has made observations on the world, that the meanest of the people will judge more eafily of the proof of matters of fact, and the credibility of testimony, than of abstract and close reasonings even upon moral subjects.

If it should be objected, that 'tis not probable that the bulk of mankind, considering their education, circumstances, the influence of sensible objects, how little they are used

to reasoning, and how much their thoughts are engaged by the necessary business and cares of life, will think and examine: I anfwer, that then they must take the consequence, which is, that they will have no certain rule at all of their actions, and know as little of the laws of reason, as of the true grounds of revelation; fo that this proves no more against a standing revelation being a proper means of instructing them in their duty, than against reason itself. And though it should be allowed, that in countries where free debate is discouraged, and forbidden under severe penalties, and the people are obfiged to take their accounts both of a revelation, and its proofs, from certain particular persons authorized and maintained for that purpose, they can have no more reason to believe even a true traditional revelation, than others may have for believing a false one; this, I apprehend, does not in the least affect the present argument, because it is purely accidental; and fuch accidents, in the prefent state of the world, while men are ambitious, designing, and interested, and apt to impose upon their fellow creatures whenever they have it in their power, are unavoidable. noan neve

THE just state of the question is, whether revelation be not, in itself, a proper rule for the generality of mankind, a rule, of which (when things are as they ought to be) they are able to judge; whether they cannot

not discern both its intrinsic goodness, and external proofs though depending on tradition. As it has been already shewn that they are capable of this, must it not be perverse in any to infinuate, that it was not fit for God to communicate it, because the wise and gracious design of it happens to be in a great measure defeated by the wickedness and craft of some, and the savish implicit submission of others? The Christian revelation was undeniably of great use when it was first published, in reforming the corrupt sentiments and manners of the world; and let it prevail now as far as it can rationally (particularly in those blessed nations of light and liberty, where far the greater part of the people may be judges upon what foundation it stands) and it will continue to be of eminent advantage. I shall only add, that if in fome countries the common people are fo inflaved, and kept in such ignorance, as to be hardly capable of judging fairly of the proofs of a traditional religion; by the same methods of imposition and restraint, by grafting superstition upon their fears, and an artful management of their credulity, their natural notions of good and evil have been abominably, and almost universally corrupted to such a degree, that it was not reasonable to expect, without an extraordinary affiftance, that they would ever recover themselves out of their degenerate state, to the knowledge and practice of the true religion of nature. Of this the old Heathen world, and, if we can credit directions N 4

dit modern accounts, Heathen nations at this day, are most notorious and flagrant examples.

I KNOW but of one difficulty that lies against what has been said under this head, which has not been already obviated, viz. that the same exercise of reason, the same thought and impartial inquiry, which is neceffary to enable men to fee the true grounds of a traditional religion, will discover all the principles of natural religion, without a revelation. What advantage is there then in a standing revelation, above mens being left to the mere light of reason? To which it will be fufficient to give this short answer, that allowing what this objection supposes to be true, it does not at all affect any part of the preceding argument; my business being only to prove, against the author of Christianity &c. who afferts the contrary, that the common people are able to judge of the truth and purity of a traditional revelation, without concerning myfelf at all with the debate, whether they might, or might not, by the same pains and care, attain to a complete knowledge of the religion of nature. However, I shall add farther, that as this does not render an external revelation in any degree less useful, when the reason of mankind is in fact corrupted and darken'd; it has likewise, when men are upon rational grounds convinc'd of the truth of it, these two great adyantages, as a standing guide, beyond the sole direction

direction of natural light; that it furnishes a more uniform, consistent, and universal rule of duty, than could reasonably be expected, considering mens different capacities, humours, prejudices, and the like, if every one was left to farm a scheme of morality for himself; and affords stronger motives to the practice of virtue, particularly by assuring us of the eternity of suture rewards, which to mere reason is at best obscure, and doubtful.

'T will be needless to make remarks on this author's account of the external proofs of a traditional revelation; because though he affirms it is all that can be faid, the reader, I make no doubt, after what has been fo largely offer'd upon this head, will think it fuch an imperfect and partial representation, as could not be given but by one, who either had not thoroughly confidered the argument, or chose to urge it so weakly that he might the more eafily triumph. Let me only observe, that it is so far from being the whole of the argument against innovations in a traditional religion, " that it was morally impossible in-" novations should creep in; the care men " have of their own fouls, and their natural " affection for posterity, obliging them from " generation to generation, to hand down " their religion just as they received it;" and, " fince it would be the highest folly " in any to attempt to introduce new doc-" trines, as a tradition receiv'd from their " ancestors; when all must know they had " re-

" receiv'd no fuch tradition," this, I fay, is fo far from being the whole of the argument, that 'tis really one of the most minute and inconsiderable branches of it: the improbability of innovations and corruptions, with respect to the Christian revelation, arising, as I have shewn, almost entirely from particular circumstances, and plain facts, which strongly intimate the contrary. And therefore his anfwer to this boasted argument, as he calls it, (though I know of none that use it as an argument of itself, much less that triumph in it) if it might pals as sufficient, were the argument urged in a general way, and the strength of the cause rested upon it, whether the tradition was written, or oral, and whatever was the state of the world; when it is mentioned only as a collateral circumstance, confirming other probabilities upon which the chief stress is laid, is weak and triffing. choic to urge it to weakly that he might the

THERE is another objection still behind, which the author of Christianity &c. frequently urges, viz. that if the common people could be satisfied, upon rational grounds, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the New Testament, yet, confidering that the meaning of words is perpetually changing; the difference of languages, and the peculiar style and manner in which these books are written, they are a rule not much to be depended on; nay, a rule that's very unsafe and dangerous, unless the people mend and improve it by their reason; as tending

tending to give them false and dishonourable notions of God, and of the methods of his moral provide ice, and lead them into great mistakes with respect to morality. " None, who confider how differently the circum-" stances of human affairs, which are con-" tinually changing, affect men; but must " fee 'tis scarce possible, that the doctrines " which were originally taught, or the prac-" tice originally us'd in any institution, should " long continue the fame; nothing being " more easy than to vary the fignification of " words *. - Had there been but one " language, and a book writ in that language, " in indelible characters, (so that there could " be none of those thirty thousand various " readings, which are own'd to be crept into " the New Testament) and all could have " access to it; yet even then, confidering how " uncertain the meaning of words are; and "the interest of defigning men, to put a " wrong sense on them; it must be morally " impossible this religion could long continue " the same -- In short, there are scarce " any words in any one language, except of " fuch things as immediately strike the senses, " that are adequately answer'd in another, so " as exactly to comprehend the fame ideas; " and if the ideas are only fewer, or more, " what confusion may not that occasion? " how great and frequent must the mistakes "then be, in translating the antiquated

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 286.

[†] Page 288.

" languages of people, who liv'd at a vast " distance of time, as well as in countries far " remote; and affected hyperbolical, para-" bolical, mystical, allegorical, and typical " ways of expressing themselves, as oppo-" fite to the usage in other parts, as East is " to West? and not only this, but it will be " likewise necessary to have an accurate " knowledge of their manners, customs, tra-" ditions, philosophy, religious notions, sects, " civil and ecclesiastical polity; of all which " the common people know as little, as they " do of the original languages; who having « very obscure and incompetent conceptions " of the principal words and phrases used in the versions, their religion must needs be " a very odd jumble of confused and incon-" fiftent notions, were it to depend on words, " and their precise meaning; and not on the " things themselves and their relations, which " are plain and obvious to common capaci-" ties; they would be in a manner entirely " govern'd by founds *. ___ Should the " chance of education throw men into the ss true traditionary religion, yet confidering " its style is not very exact, there being gene-" rally more express'd than is meant; and " things of the greatest consequence are often " fo treated, as that men can't from thence " perceive the nature and extent of their du-" ty; and even precepts of the greatest mo-" ment are sometimes so far from being de-

" liver'd plainly and fimply, that they are "express'd after a general, undetermin'd, "nay, hyperbolical manner; so that even in this case there's a pecessive for the same

" this case, there's a necessity for the com-"mon people to have recourse to the reason

" of things +."

Now in answer to this I observe,

I. THAT what is here said in general about " the changing sense of words, and difference " of languages," affects all antient books as well as the writings of the New Testament; and must prove, if it proves any thing, that they cannot be translated into modern languages, so as to give an unlearned reader a just notion of the design and meaning of the authors even in the plainest passages, or upon the most common and intelligible subjects; nay, that they cannot be understood by the learned themselves (for if they may be understood 'tis most certain they may likewise be translated) and consequently that the study of dead languages, and of all the valuable remains of antiquity, is perfectly useless and trifling. The very fame things may be faid with respect to the old Heathen moralists, which the writers of our author's stamp pretend to understand, and likewise to translate; that " considering " how uncertain the meaning of words is, it " must be morally impossible the sense of them " could long continue the same;" and " that

" there are scarce any words in any one lan-" guage, except of fuch things as immedi-" ately strike the senses, that are adequately answered in another, so as exactly to comor prehend the same ideas; and if the ideas " are only fewer, or more, what confusion " may not that occasion?" But though this would be effeemed ridiculous enough if applied to common authors, it must pass for very good fense when urged against revelation; and why, when the nature of the thing is the fame? Truly, for no cause but because they will have it fo, as it is necessary to secure a favourite point, that must by no means be dropt. Is not this trifling with the name of reason, and most egregious partiality, and inconfistency?

ADD to this, that the sense of the words used in the original writings themselves is now, just what it was when the books of the New Testament were first written; because it is a dead language, and consequently has not undergone that flux, and those variations, to which living languages, in a long course of time, may be subject.

But is there not great difficulty "in translating an antiquated language, that a- bounds with hyperbolical, parabolical, my- fical, allegorical, and typical ways of expression, as opposite to the usage in other parts, as East is to West?" Without doubt, what difficulty there is must by entirely here; and

and if the author of Christianity &c. had treated this part of the argument with that good judgment, which he shews himself to be master of upon some other occasions, he would have infifted only on this; and not have faid fo much about " the various figni-" fication of words, the difficulty of fixing " their meaning, and expressing the same " thing fo, as to convey the fame ideas in " different languages," the confequence of which, how plaufible foever it may feem, is really, that all antient authors are unintelligible; and that all attempts to give just translations of them, and express their true sentiments in a modern language, fo that persons, who want either capacity, or opportunity, for confulting the originals themselves, may read and understand them, are idle and romantic. Now in order to remove this objection let it be confider'd,

2. That these writings, the obscurity of which is so much complain'd of, were chiefly and more immediately design'd for the use of that age in which they were composed; when sigurative expressions were easy and familiar, and parables and allegories usual methods of instruction. The moral precepts of our Saviour, and the doctrines which he taught in person, being all deliver'd, either in public discourses to the men of that generation, or in private instructions to his disciples, 'tis natural to expect the common phrases, idioms, and peculiar ways of expression, that were then

in use; nay indeed, the usual forms of speaking were the most proper way of communicating his sentiments to those with whom he convers'd; and it would have look'd odd, if one man should have attempted to frame a new language, or if he had avoided those peculiarities, by which the language of the country, where he was born and educated, was distinguish'd from that of other nations. And the same may be said of writings, which we always find to be in that style, and manner, which generally prevailed in the places where they were first published.

Bur besides that the books of the New Testament were intended primarily, and more directly, for the benefit of that age (as all books are that are publish'd in any age) and consequently must be written in the language, style, and manner of expression, that was most familiar both to the writers and readers; befides this I fay, it may be observ'd more particularly, that feveral of them are only occafional; and were written either at the request of particular persons, which perhaps was the case of St. Luke's gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles, both inscrib'd to Theophilus; or else, upon some special incidents that occur'd, and requir'd that the apostles should interpose, and give directions both to private christians, and whole churches. And certainly 'tis most unreasonable to expect, in such writings, any other than the common phrases, and idioms, that were then in use in those parts of the world,

world, how different soever from the languages of other countries, and especially from the genius of modern languages. So that 'tis a mistake of the author of Christianity &c. that " precepts relating to morality are de-" liver'd in the New Testament after an ob-" fcure manner, when they might have been " deliver'd otherwise: *" This, I say, is plainly a mistake in the sense he intended it, viz. That there is an affected obscurity in the moral rules laid down in the gofpel; because the manner of writing therein used was, all circumstances consider'd, by far the most natural; a way that the writers themfelves had always been accustom'd to; and which took, most generally, among the perfons directly concern'd.

The inference I would draw from all this is, that the books of the New Testament, though they may be obscure to us at this distance, might, notwithstanding the figures, parables, and proverbial expressions that are frequent in them, be a very plain and easy rule of morals to the age when they were written, and for whose use they were chiefly and more immediately design'd. For as words are arbitrary signs of ideas, sigurative and proverbial ways of speaking, or writing, when they are the common turn of a language, may have as certain and determinate a mean-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 27.

ing as the most plain and simple expressions, and convey precisely the same ideas to all: otherwise, all the antient eastern languages (as well as the modern which abound very much in strong figures) must have been absolute jargon and confusion, and could not answer the end of language. To which we may add, that the objeurity of some parts of the New Testament, to us, may arise from the general method of epistolary writings, in which there is a peculiar concileness; and frequently dark hints, and references to facts, and customs; or to passages in the letters to which they are an answer; all which was perfectly underflood by those to whom they were directed. This I take, confidering the time when, and the persons for whom it was more immediately written, to be a complete vindication of the Ryle of the New Testament; and a sufficient proof, that notwithstanding the parables, and the proverbial and figurative expressions that are used in it, it might be a clear and intelligible, and most u/ejul system of religion and morality.

But our author has a text against this, being very dextrous at quoting scripture against its own authority, and sufficiency*, viz. "That without a parable Jesus spake not to the multitude +; and for this remarkable reason, that seeing they might see, and not

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 332. 4 Matt. xiii. 34.

"perceive; nnd bearing they might hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins be forgiven them *." By which he would infinuate, that our Saviour made use of parables on purpose to make his discourses unintelligible to the bulk of the people; and for fear lest they might have been prevailed upon, if he had delivered his doctrine more plainly, to forsake their evil courses, and be happy. A very strange design indeed in one that pretended to be a teacher sent from God; and that it was the chief end of his mission to call sinners to repentance.

To fet this matter in a just light let it be confider'd, that parables were common methods of instruction among the Jews; and that our Saviour, in conformity to the custom of the age and nation in which he lived, fometimes used them by way of illustration, to inculcate important and useful principles in a more strong, and, at the same time, a very plain and familiar manner. Parables of this kind, as that of the rich man and Lazarus, of the Pharisee and Publican, and several others, were eafily and universally understood. Nor was it likely that any inconvenience would follow upon using parabolical ways of expression, when they were common; because all the people knowing that there was one grand point purfued, would attend only to that; and not

^{*} Mark iv. 12.

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be apt to frain every circumstance, which was added to maintain the propriety and decorum of the parable, and render the whole representation consistent and beautiful; or extort mysteries from it, which were not in the intention of the speaker. So that 'tis most evident, that the view of Jesus, when he spake in parables, was not always to difguise his sentiments; and much less to wrap himself up in such impenetrable darkness, that the people might not understand, nor consequently receive any benefit from his discourse; but on the contrary, to affift their apprehensions, and represent the great principles of religion, and moral obligations, both in a more easy way, and with greater spirit and force.

Bur then it must be own'd, that at other times, when he apprehended that the truths he was about to deliver would give great offence, he made use of parables to conceal his defign in some measure, that it might not appear all at once, and provoke the passions of his hearers. And in my opinion, this is fo far from being a reflection upon his conduct, that it shews the great wildom and tenderness of this divine teacher; and that he studied the most effectual methods to promote the great end of his ministry, the reformation and happiness of mankind. For what good purpose could it possibly serve, to speak ungrateful and offensive truths openly and bluntly; which, being contrary to mens prepossessions and prejudices, would naturally irritate and inflame their

their minds? There is a great deal of art and address necessary in dealing with the multitude; especially in a person who would correct epidemical vices, and remove their favourite, most facred, and venerable prejudices. In fuch cases, falling upon the point directly will infallibly harden the vicious, the defigning, and interested; and perhaps so far engage the passions even of the more bonest and ingenuous in the debate, as to hinder the cool and impartial exercise of their reason; and by this means, not only frustrate the good effect of our endeavours to reclaim them, but render their errors more incurable. Whereas, if we infinuate things in fuch a way that persons shall not immediately see our defign, and consequently in a way that gives no fudden provocation, nor alarms their prejudices; though they do not understand our meaning at first, yet afterwards the teachable and well-dispos'd, in their private calm and deliberate reflections, will very probably difcover what was intended; and be convinced likewise of its reasonableness and importance; and so receive great benefit by it. And as for those who are inslaved to evil babits, and prejudic'd in favour of their vices, 'tis no matter whether they understand it or no; because while there is fuch a perver fe temper of mind, there is scarce any hope of their being reform'd; and the plainest and most important truths are likely to have little or no influence upon them.

Now that this is the whole of what is meant in that passage of St. Mark's gospel, which is cited by the author of Christianity &cc. is evident from all the circumstances of the history, as it is related by the Evangelists. The fense, which he infinuates, is in itself fo very strange, improbable, and unaccountable, confidering the great benevolence of disposition, and ardent defire to instruct and reform the world, which our bleffed Saviour always discover'd, that 'tis hard to conceive how any fair and candid reader can imagine it to be the true sense; but besides, it will soon appear that it really is not. For what is express'd by St. Matthew thus, All these Things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spake he not unto them *; is explain'd by St. Mark just in the manner I am speaking of, And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to bear it; but without a parable, i. e. as the connection necessarily requires, because they could not bear a more free and undifguis'd way of talking, spake he not unto them +. And exactly parallel to what is here faid, are our Saviour's words in the 11th and 12th verses. And be faid unto them, [i. e. to the twelve] unto you [who have humble, honest, well dispos'd minds] it is given, or allow'd to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those that are without [and are under the

* Mat. xiil. 34.

† Mark iv. 33, 34.

power of strong prejudices] all these things are done in parables; that feeing they may fee, and not perceive, and bearing they may bear, and not understand; i. e. because such could not bear a plain and naked representation of the truth, it was necessary that the light of it should be somewhat clouded, and veil'd under parables and allegories, that it might not offend their weak minds, which were corrupted and perverted by the force of prejudice, and the prevalency of irregular passions. The phrases, that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and hearing they may hear, and not understand, mean no more than if it had been faid, because seeing they see not, &c. and bearing they hear not, &c. and therefore it is actually express'd thus in St. Matthew's account of the same discourse, which may be consider'd as a comment upon St. Mark's shorter history, and is a clear and full explication of it. Therefore speak I to them in parables, because they feeing fee not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, who saith, By bearing ye shall bear, and shall not understand, and feeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of bearing, and their eyes have they clos'd; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and bear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them *. 1

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^{*} Matth. xiii. 13, 14, 15.

ADD to all this, that the darkest of Christ's parables might be understood, with respect to their general design and tendency at least, by an attentive and considerate hearer; which is a plain proof, that though they might be very proper to foften and palliate his meaning, when prudence requir'd it, they could not be defign'd to render it unintelligible, or even difficult to find out, to persons who gave themselves time for cool reflection and examination. And therefore we are told by St. Mark, that when his disciples inquir'd about this very parable of the fower, which occasion'd the discourse we have now been considering, he feem'd to wonder at their ignorance, and faid, Know ye not this parable +? And again, when they asked him the meaning of another of his parables, Are ye also yet without underflanding ‡? By which he intimated, that it was not so much the obscurity of the parables themselves, as their own dulness, and want of thought, that made them not perceive the import of his doctrine.

It will be asked however, whether, allowing the books of the New Testament, notwithstanding the sigurative, parabolical, and proverbial ways of expression with which they abound, to have been plain and intelligible in the age when they were first written; their meaning be not very obscure and

uncertain, especially to the common people, in these remote times; when such forms of speaking are strange and unusual? And confequently, whether they are not very improper to be recommended as a fanding rule of religion and morality, fince 'tis likely they will lead the people into great mistakes even about the perfections and providence of God; and the moral directions contain'd in them are so dark and confus'd? Undoubtedly all this must be allow'd, if the scheme which the author of Christianity &c. proceeds upon be true, viz. that the common people are to make no use of their reason in interpreting the facred writings, but to be govern'd entirely by founds. But what need of fuch a supposition? Do the advocates for revelation affert and maintain this? On the contrary, is it not granted by all, that it is the sense of these authors, and not their words barely, that we are concern'd about? And should not the same care be taken in order to understand their meaning, as is necessary with respect to other writers?

'Twill be sufficient therefore to my present purpose to shew, that the books of the
New Testament are so plain, as, in all ages,
to answer the great design, for which, if they
are a divine revelation, they must have been
priginally intended; — that the common
people, if they will think, and make any use
at all of their reason, may easily learn from
them all the essential doctrines of the Christian
religion;

religion; that notwithstanding the peculiar fyle and manner in which they are written, they are calculated to give them the justest notions of God, and a plain, as well as perfect, rule of morality, inforc'd by the most rational and powerful motives ; --- that 'tis not the natural consequence of their using figures, parables, allegories, and the like, if any fall into errors about important principles of religion and virtue, because there is a sufficient guard against all such abuses to every common reader, but owing to accidents which, in the present state of the world, are unavoidable, let the rule of action be upon the whole ever fo plain; and that what difficulties there are, as it must be own'd there will be difficulties after all, are such as the bulk of mankind need not much concern themselves with, in order to answer the wife and gracious intention of God in communicating the Chriftian revelation. And in order to thew that this is really the case, I have several things briefly to offer. Let it be observed therefore,

3. THAT figurative, allegorical, proverbial expressions &c. do not necessarily render the meaning of a book, even in those very passages, obscure, and hard to be understood. For in parables, and allegories, the general design and drift of the writer, and the main point he had in view, may be clear and obvious to every one, that reads him with the least attention. And its not unreasonable to suppose,

pose, that our Saviour's parables, in particular, may be more intelligible to the common people now, than to those to whom they were first deliver'd; because they have his own explications of some of them; and others. those, for instance, which represented the then future swift and extensive progress of the gospel among the Gentiles, may be much plainer fince that wonderful event happen'd, to which they are so easily accommodated, than they were to the body of the Jews, whose notions and prejudices in this particular point darken'd their understandings in some meafure, and hinder'd them from apprehending, fo foon as they might otherwife, the true intent and meaning of them.

AND all that can be inferr'd from the use of figurative expressions in the New Testament is, that these books are not always to be taken literally. But what then? May it not be plain, when figurative ways of speaking are us'd, that they are figurative? And may not the sense of them be so obvious, that no reader of the least reslection can mistake it? Without doubt it may. Nay, the author of Christianity &cc. in his labour'd collection, has given some instances of this kind, and instances, which are, in all reason, too trisling to be urged in so grave and serious an argument; as that all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon *; that if the things

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^{* 2} Chron. ix. 23.

which Jesus did were written, the world itself could not contain the books +. For if, in the room of each of these passages, he could have produced a thousand, it would signify just nothing; both as they are in themselves of no consequence, and do not in the least affect the general design of revelation, nor any of its important doctrines; and because the common people must immediately perceive that such expressions are figurative (somewhat of a like nature being very usual in languages, which have not, generally, so much of amplification and hyperbole) and never were so stupid as to understand them literally. But to come more directly to the main difficulty.

4. THOSE parts of the New Testament, which are express'd in the most plain and fimple manner, give a complete and most rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and a noble scheme of morality; fo that the meanest of the people, without concerning themselves at all with figurative and proverbial phrases, allegories, parables, and the like, nay, if we suppose that they are not capable of understanding them, have an excellent system of natural religion, recommended upon more certain principles, and inforc'd by ftronger motives, than can be found in all the writings of the antient Philosophers. And these plain accounts, the sense of which is obvious and easy to all, are a good general

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^{*} John xxi. 50

Christian revelation defended. 205 explication of all the dark passages, and a sufficient guard against errors of consequence, with respect to any grand point of religion and morality.

IT will fignify but little to fay, that the people actually mistake figures, parables, allegories, &c. and are led into false notions by them. For if explaining dark passages in a book, which, it is generally believed, can contain no contradictions and inconfiftencies, by fuch as are clear and indisputable, be the most natural method of interpreting it; a method which all who think must discern and approve of; and if the common people, provided they follow this method, and make any use of their reason, cannot be mislead by the peculiar style and phrase of scripture into unworthy conceptions of God, or mistake the general nature of true religion; all of which is most evident, and undeniable; it necessarily follows, that these books are upon the whole a plain and useful rule, and wisely calculated for the instruction of the bulk of mankind.

THE question is not how they do, but how they might easily understand them by the common use of their reason; their indolence, carelesiness, and prejudice, is not the least objection against the sufficiency of the scripture-rule; because if they will not think for themselves, but resign their understandings and consciences implicitly to the direc-

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tion and conduct of others, the plainest rule we can possibly conceive of will be no fecurity against the most abjurd and dangerous errors. And accordingly, this is most notorious with respect to reason, which the author of Christianity &c. and all the writers on the same side of the question, magnify as a most easy, sure, and infallible guide; that its clearness, universality, and sufficiency to direct in matters of religion, have been no prefervative against the most extravagant superstition, and the vilest corruptions of natural religion and morality. If therefore notwithstanding those gross abuses of it, it may, in itself, be a plain and obvious rule, so may revelation.

AND as for what our author objects against the method which I have proposed, for understanding dark passages of scripture, or at least, for preventing the common people from being led into any great mistakes by them, that " if we can't depend on single texts; and where there are several, the " plainest are to carry it; the difficulty will " be to know which are the plainest; since " the different sects of Christians have ever " pretended that the plainest texts are on their " side; and wonder'd how their adversaries " could mistake their meaning ";" it is saying in effect, that there is no rule, in the nature of things, whereby to distinguish between

what is clear, and what is obscure; or else, that be the difference, in itself, ever so discernible, the common people can form no judgment if there are strong and bold pretences on both fides, i. e. in truth, want a capacity to discern between confidence and reasoning. I cannot but take notice here, by the way, of the inconfistency of this writer's principles, when he has different points in view; for at some times, reason is so plain a guide to the common people, that they need nothing else to teach them the whole of religion, and prevent all mistakes about it; but at other, they are a flupid berd, destitute even of common sense, who can't distinguish between plain and figurative expressions, and are under a kind of necessity of understanding figurative and proverbial ways of speaking, parables, allegories, &c. literally; not only in opposition to the clearest dictates of reafon, but likewise to the most express and positive affertions of revelation itself. This shews, indeed, that such persons have a very strong inclination to run down reveal'd religion: but makes it doubtful, whether they have any fix'd and uniform fet of principles of their own, to offer in the room of it. Again.

5. 'Tis very material, and worth observing, that the generality of the common people do not, in fast, misunderstand a great number of the figurative and proverbial expressions used in scripture; and are not at a loss

loss about the meaning of those precepts, that are deliver'd "after a general, undeter-"min'd, nay, hyperbolical manner;" which shews, that such a way of writing does not, in the nature of the thing itself, hinder, but that these books may, upon the whole, be a plain rule of conduct, fitted for the use of the bulk of mankind. I shall give several instances of this kind both from the Old and New Testament; confining myself chiefly to those passages, which the author of Christianity &c. has heap'd together as great obscurities, and general, confused, nay false accounts of things, if taken strictly and literally.

How few are there among the common people, who interpret those passages according to the letter, which impute bodily parts, buman infirmities, and passions to the Deity *? fcarce one in a thousand. The generality firmly believe, that God is an infinite invifible spirit; and consequently, that when he is represented as having eyes, ears, bands, and the like; as fitting upon the circle of the earth+; riding upon the wings of the wind; and moving from place to place to observe the conduct of his creatures; this is only accommodated to our present conceptions, and expressing abstract truths by such ideas as are most familiar to the bulk of mankind; and therefore they take it to denote no more

^{*} Christianisy &c. p. 251. † Isa. 40. 22. Pfalm 18. 10.

than his knowledge and power, his supreme majesty, universal providence, particular care and direction of events, and narrow inspection of the actions of men. In like manner, when "God is represented for many days " together as visible on Mount Sinai*," the people generally understand it, not as if the invisible God bimself was seen, but of some external glory, the fymbol and manifestation of his presence. And those elegant and lofty descriptions of the Divine being, with which the poetical parts of scripture, especially, abound, have a natural tendency to strike not only the vulgar, but more philosophical minds, with the most folemn awe and veneration of him; and give the strongest and most elevated sentiments of his power and providence, which are figured with fo much pomp and magnificence; and consequently are of excellent use.

AGAIN, ask the people whether repentance can properly be attributed to God, and they will answer almost universally, that be is not a man that be should repent; and therefore, when repentance is ascribed to him in the Old Testament, they do not understand it as if he had a different judgment of things, or was sorry for any part of his conduct (and indeed cannot naturally, if they don't consult their reason at all, take this to be the sense of the revelation, because there are other passages that absolutely deny it +) but as a figurative

^{*} Christianity &cc. P. 252. † Numb. 23. 19. 1 Sam. 15. 29. Rom. 11. 24. P expref-

expression denoting, that, in some particular cases, he acted like a person who really repented. Thus, with respect to an instance which is mention'd by the author of Christianity &c *. when God was highly displeased with the abominable corruptions and wickedness of mankind, he did, as far as was confiftent with his perfect wisdom, unmake them again by caufing a general deluge, and deftroying the whole human race, eight persons only excepted, who were faved to stock the world a-new with inhabitants; and in this acted as if he had repented of baving made man on the earth +. Again, when he put by Saul's family from succeeding to the crown of Ifrael after his decease, and commanded the prophet Samuel to anoint David in his life-time; he acted as if he repented that he had made Saul king t. And thus likewise, when he is reprefented as weary of repenting; what can the common people, who generally believe that God can't properly repent, understand by this, but the very thing that was intended, viz. that instead of suspending, or removing his judgments, which his prevailing inclination to mercy, and defire of the reformation and happiness of a guilty people, had inclin'd him to do in times past, as if he repented of the evil threatned; he was now determin'd, having found gentler methods to be ineffectual, and that they were incorrigible offenders, upon their absolute ruin, unless they prevented it

^{*} Pag. 251. † Gen. 6. 6. ‡ 1 Sam. 15. 11.

by a speedy amendment. This meaning of the phrase must have been so evident that none could mistake it, and consequently it would have appear'd, upon the first reading, to be nothing at all to our author's purpose, if he had only been so ingenuous as to quote the whole sentence, which runs thus; thou hast for saken me, saith the Lord, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting *.

FARTHER, when God is faid to have rested, and to be refresh'd, after having sinished his work of creation, the common people are not so stupid as to imagine, that he was so satigued by hard labour as to need proper refreshment; but the easy and obvious idea convey'd to ALL by this expression is, "that "in six days God ended the creation of the world, and was pleased with what his omnipotence had effected, as answering exactly "the model that was design'd by his infinite wisdom and goodness."

THE same may be said as to other passages. For instance, when it is affirm'd, that God did things to try people; the vulgar, in general, know as well as this author, that a being, whom revelation in the most distinct and express terms, as well as reason, declares to be omniscient, could not do it for

^{*} Jer. 15. 6.

bis own information, but that the persons try'd might have an opportunity to give an unexceptionable and noble proof of their virtue and integrity; which would be attended with very great advantages with respect to themselves, by affording them a stronger assurance of their sincerity, and consequently the most solid satisfaction in a review of their conduct, and as it is the necessary tendency of difficult and heroic acts of virtue especially, to strengthen very much the inward principles and habits of virtue; and besides it might be of singular use, as a standing example, to animate and encourage others.

AGAIN, can it be supposed that any of the people, when God is faid to swear in wrath*, imagine that he took a rash oath, and fware in a passion? Must they not be convinc'd from the books of the Old and New Testament themselves, as well as by the reason of their minds, that this is impossible? The general conception that they form of it is, I make no doubt, that being justly difpleased with the perverse and ungrateful behaviour of the Israelites in the wilderness, and the many repeated affronts they had offer'd him, he declar'd in the most folemn manner, that, unless they repented, they should not enter into his rest +. Add to this, that the meanest of the people universally include in their notion of God, that he is the fu-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 250. + Pf. 95. 11.

Christian revelation defended. 213 preme being; and consequently, when they read of his fwearing, are not in the least danger of taking in the common idea of an oath, viz. an invocation of, and appeal to, a superior. And why should the author of Christianity &c. mention this, when he knows it is not what the scripture means, when God is at any time faid to fwear? The real sense of scripture is certainly very intelligible, and rational; for the form of what it calls God's oath is, as I live faith the Lord*, i. e. as fure as I exist such and such things are true, or shall come to pass. Now what exception is there in reason against this? or must we amuse the world with idle cavils about the propriety of words, when the thing intended by them is easily and universally understood, and intirely just and defensible? In this writer's notion of an oath, 'tis undoubtedly true that God cannot swear: and 'tis as undeniable, that there is not a fingle passage, either in the Old or New Testament, that so much as intimates he ever did; fuch objections therefore are trifling with mankind in the groffest manner, and a much greater discredit to the persons that make them, than to the scriptures against which they are urg'd. For the whole of what is faid amounts only to this, that an idea is fix'd to a word, which the author of Christianity &c. does not think proper; i. e. which is not the usual acceptation of it now, though it might be very com-

^{*} Ez. 33. 11. Heb. 6, 13.

monly used this way by the age when these books were first written (who, as words are arbitrary, had certainly a right, by general consent, to fix what meaning to them they pleas'd;) but it cannot be pretended, that any real inconvenience could follow from it, because the sense of the word is so clearly determin'd, that none in that age, nor in any age of the world since, could possibly mistake it.

In like manner, when God is faid " to bis; and in one place to his for a fly that " is in the uttermost part of the river of E-" gypt, and for the bee that is in the land " of Affyria *," there are scarce any of the common people that can be supposed to understand it literally; nor was there the least likelihood that they would, either in the age when these writings were composed, such strong poetical figures being then very common and familiar; or afterwards, the scriptures themselves, if they confine their inquiries there, giving the most exalted conceptions of the Deity, that human reason can form. On the contrary, the general fense of this passage is so very obvious, that even a superficial reader can hardly miss of it (tho he may not perceive the aptness and beauty of the allusion) viz. that the meanest creatures are subject to God's command; and that he makes use of them as the instruments of his

^{*} Christianity &cc. p. 252. If. 7. 18.

Christian revelation defended. 215 wise and righteous providence, to bring desolation on a finful and degenerate people.

'Tis a mistake to imagine, that the Brief and literal sense is always the most obvious, even to the vulgar. For when fuch actions are attributed to the supreme being, as are inconfistent with those plain accounts of his nature and perfections which revelation always inculcates, as well as with the notions that reason suggests; the literal sense is evidently unnatural. If therefore when God is faid to bis, none, who are not quite destitute of all reflection, can take it to be literally true; and if the thing intended by it be fo plain, that all must immediately perceive it; what ill consequence can possibly follow from the use of such a figurative expression? 'Tis most certain, that in this passage of Isaiah, it is so far from having a tendency to mislead the generality of readers into false and degrading thoughts of God; that in its most natural sense, a sense which it is not conceivable one in ten thousand will mistake, it gives them a very strong and lively idea of his universal dominion and providence.

But if the author of Christianity &c. defign'd to burlesque the phrase itself, as well as to represent it as very obscure to the common people, and likely to lead them into low and unworthy conceptions of the Deity; which seems indeed to have been his intention by his manner of introducing it; I think, to P 4

speak modestly, that he has not shewn any great judgment, or skill in criticism. For befides that the general and obvious sense of it, which the people cannot well mistake, is just and rational; the metaphor itself, by which it is express'd, is exceedingly pertinent and beautiful; intimating the universal command of the great creator, by his speaking to the lowest rank of creatures, as it were, in their own language; fo that they as readily follow him as their leader, as beings of an higher order, who are directed by an intelligent and rational principle, and are always prepar'd to obey his fummons, and execute the great defigns of his providence. And was I to put an author into a method to make himself completely ridiculous, I would advise him to write a critic in the same manner upon Milton's paradise lost, as is frequently practis'd with respect to poetical passages of the Old Testament; in which he would have an opportunity of shewing his little wit, by finding fault with feveral things even in this great poet's descriptions of the Deity, which cannot be literally true; but have been admir'd, however, by the greatest genius's of the present age, both for the sublimity of the sentiment, and the elegance and grandeur of the figuring. In the mean time 'tis a most undeniable truth, that cis really as abjurd to censure beauties and elegancies in the facred writings, as in any common authors how much foever applauded, and celebrated; though, through the partiality of the age, it may not meet with equal dif-

discouragement. For mean and spiteful criticisms are, in themselves, never the less contemptible for being suffered to pass in the world, and because they are not actually received with that contempt they deserve.

AGAIN, our author has thrown together feveral texts of scripture to prove Moses to be a God; nay, the Lord God of the Ifraelites; in order " to shew (as he says) how little " we are to depend on words and phrases; "" i. e. to shew what no body denies, that we are not always to understand them literally. But does this writer really believe, that any of the meanest of the people ever were, or ever could be, induc'd to think, if there had been twice as many texts of the same kind, that Moses was "the eternal omnipotent " God, the maker of heaven and earth; who, " by his own immediate power, performed " all the wonders in Egypt, and brought the " Israelites out from thence?"

IF when figurative expressions are used, they will necessarily be understood by All (as in the present case) to be figurative, they can do no hurt, even though their precise meaning be unintelligible to the bulk of mankind. Let us suppose therefore, that the common people are not likely to find out the true sense of those texts; what will be the consequence of such a supposition? Will it follow, that the

books in which fuch passages are found are of no authority? or that they may not, notwithstanding, be, upon the whole, a plain and useful rule of religion and morality? Not in the least. For let the number of mere unintelligibles (by which I mean fuch things, as very many of the common people, in every age, are not likely thoroughly to understand) be much greater than, I believe, it really is: if the books of the Old and New Testament give a plain and rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and a good general scheme of religion supported upon the best principles, and by stronger motives than mere reason can suggest; if this account may be understood, whether the defign of figures, parables, &c. be feen or not; if there be a fufficient guard, in the books themselves, against all errors dishonourable to God, or injurious to the practice of true piety and virtue; and the common people cannot fall into mistakes of this kind, if they make any use of their reason, and sollow the natural and easy method of explaining dark and figurative paffages by fuch as are clear and determinate; they are certainly of very great advantage as a standing rule, and fitted for general instruction and use.

I HAVE hitherto put the worst supposition that can be made, viz. that a great part of the people, in these remote times, are not likely to understand the meaning of those texts relating to Moses, and shewn that no ill consequence can follow from it, because they never did, and 'tis utterly improbable they ever will, put that abfurd fense upon them which our author infinuates; but, in reality, these passages have nothing of difficulty or obscurity in them, but are very plain and intelligible to every common reader. Thus, for instance, when we consider Moses as speaking in the name of God, there is not the least harshness or impropriety in his promising rain in due season to such as keep his commandments *; and to Joshua, that he would be with him in carrying the people into Canaan +; or, in his faying, that he did great works, yea, miracles in the fight of the Israelites, on purpose that they might know that he was the Lord their God t. Again, when the Lord said to him, see, I have made thee a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet **; the obvious meaning of the text, which immediately occurs to ALL, is, that God deputed him to act in his name, and give forth his commands, and appointed Aaron, because he was the better speaker, to be his messenger and mouth to Pharaoh: and therefore 'tis expresly faid in another place, which may ferve for a full explication of the passage we are now confidering, that Aaron should be to him instead of a mouth, and he to Aaron instead of God ++. Farther, as God imploy'd Moses in bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt,

^{*} Deut. xxix. 13, 14, 15, &c. † Deut. xxxi. 23. ‡ Deut. xxix. 5, 6. ** Exod. vii. 1. †† Exod. iv.

the same work might very justly, and according to forms of speaking that are common in all languages, be attributed to both; to God as the principal and immediate author of their deliverance, and to Moses as his instrument. As he was the messenger and prophet of God, and gave sufficient credentials of a divine commission, 'twas fit and necessary that the people should acknowledge him under that character; and believe in him, as well as in God that fent him. And the phrase being baptized into, or into the name of, any person, as it is explained by St. Paul in that very epistle, in which he says, figuratively and allufively only, that the Israelites were baptized into Moses *, implies no more than this; that by the ceremony of baptism we give ourselves up to his conduct, as one authoriz'd and appointed by God to be our leader; declare that we are his disciples, and make a public profession of that religion which God sent him to publish +.

AND whereas it is faid, that "Moses is "pray'd to, under the appellation of Lord, "to forgive sin;" the true state of the case is this. In one of the passages referred to we are told, that God being displeas'd with Aaron and Miriam for speaking against Moses, smote Miriam with a leprosy: upon which Aaron, in a submissive manner, begg'd of Moses to forgive the offence they had com-

* 1 Cor. x. 2.

+ See Ch. i. 13, 14, 15.

mitted against him, as the person appointed by God to be their commander and leader (which was but a point of justice, and a necessary reparation of the injury he had done him,) and believing that Miriam's cure depended on his prayer to God for her, defired him to intercede in her behalf. These words, Alas, my Lord, I befeech thee, lay not the fin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have finned *, can't possibly mean any thing else, in their first and most obvious sense, considering the character of the person who supplicates, and the notion he must necessarily have of him to whom he petitions; and no prejudice can pervert so plain a pasfage, but what would obscure and darken every thing; especially if we add what immediately follows, that Moses, instead of pretending to do any thing by an authority and power inherent in himself, cried unto the Lord, faying, Heal her now, O God, I befeech thee. Let her not be as one dead +.

The other text I need but just set before the reader, to shew that 'tis entirely impertinent; Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said, I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin, only this once; and entreat the Lord your God, that he may take away from me this death only ‡. What

^{*} Numb. xii. 11. ‡ Exod. x. 16, 17.

cavilling is here about the words, fin and forgiveness? I cannot but think, that the author of Christianity &c. has, in this affair, sinn'd against all rules of decency, and ought to pray to be forgiven; or, in other words, to ask pardon of the world, for this extravagant trisling with the common sense of mankind.

IF it be said, that texts of this nature have been actually urg'd to prove the same point, in one of the most considerable controversies among Christians: I answer, that I am as free to condemn that use of them there, as here; but this is nothing towards proving the main point, the obscurity of scripture in itself. Nay, the quite contrary may rather be inferr'd from it. For as the very same sort of texts are universally and immediately understood when they relate to Moses; the reason why they are misapply'd in any other case can't be the obscurity of the texts themselves, but it must be owing to some accidental prejudice.

LET us now consider briefly some of the texts of the New Testament, which the author of Christianity &c. fancies to be very obscure and confus'd; and we shall find, that compared with other passages in which the same things are more largely explain'd, and with the general tenor of the Christian revelation, they have a natural and easy sense that can't well be mistaken. The main of what he has advanc'd

advanc'd upon this head is, really, finding fault with the language in which the New Testament was written, for being different from the genius of modern languages; and indeed, 'tis very easy to talk in general about figures, and peculiar strange ways of speaking, that render the defign of these old books very dark and uncertain; but if it be found, that even those passages, which are urg'd as the strongest proofs of their objcurity, are almost universally understood in their just and proper fense, what will become of all this thew of reasoning? It will appear to be only starting imaginary difficulties, and amusing ourselves with empty speculations against fact and experience. For if particular texts are very feldom miltaken by the meanest of the people, this is the most convincing argument in the world, that they are, in themselves, sufficiently clear and intelligible.

Now thus the case stands most evidently, with respect to the greatest part of those texts, the meaning of which our author has laboured to prove to be intricate and perplex'd to the common people; the true state of the case, I say, is quite contrary to what he has represented it, viz. that they are generally and thoroughly understood. Where is the man who supposes, that when our Saviour says, Think not I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace but a sword*, his

^{*} Matt. x. 34.

words are to be interpreted Arietly; as if it was the direct defign of his mission to put the world in a flame, and to promote and incourage contention and variance amongst mankind, and the dreadful guilt and miseries of war? Nay, who that knows any thing of the mild, benevolent, and amiable temper which the Christian religion inspires, can possibly entertain such a thought as this? On the contrary, confult the lowest of the vulgar who think at all about it, and you will find that the sense of this passage is universally agreed upon among them, and they will all concur in some such paraphrase of it as this: " Do not expect that I shall be quietly own'd " and submitted to, or that my religion will " be readily and peaceably embrac'd, for if " you do, the event will defeat and disappoint " your expectations; though I was fent to " refine and civilize mankind, and root out " of their nature all fowre unfociable and mif-" chievous passions, and to make them gentle " affable and condescending in their behaviour, " yet, through the prevailing degeneracy and " corruption of the world, I shall prove the " occasion of strife and discord, of unnatural " beats and animofities, of violent batreds and " bloody massacres, and men will, upon the " account of my religion, break through the " bonds of nature, and the strongest ties of " bumanity; as if indeed the very end of my " coming was, not to give peace, but rather " division *; to set a man at variance against

^{*} Lnke xii. 51.

" his father, and the daughter against her mo-

" ther, and the daughter-in-law against her

" mother-in-law +".

AGAIN, when it is faid, if any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and fifters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple *; the sense of this text is never the less obvious, because the expressions us'd in it are figurative. And accordingly, none of the most ignorant of the common people ever understand it literally, (their constant practice, even while they profess to have the hope of good christians, is an evident demonstration of the contrary) but only of a comparative hatred; i.e. in other words, that they are oblig'd to forfake their dearest friends and relatives, and facrifice their most valuable worldly interests, nay life itself, rather than renounce Christianity, or do any thing inconfistent with the obligations of their religion and conscience; which is the very explication that Christ himself has given of it, in other parallel passages. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth fon or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, i.e. who is not always prepar'd to fuffer, whenever he is called to it, in defence of my religion, is not worthy of me. He that findeth

i Matt. x. 35.

* Luke xiv. 26.

bis life, shall lose it; and be that loseth bis life for my sake shall find it +. And there is no man that bath left house, or brethren, or fisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my fake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundred fold now in this time, houses. and brethren and fifters, and mother, and children, and lands, with persecutions; i. e. in a sense of his Integrity, of the greatness of his mind and his manly beroic behaviour, he shall enjoy fuch inward fatisfaction, and fuch pleafing views of the approbation and favour of the supreme governour of the world, as must make even a state of persecution vastly preferable to the best accommodations and pleafures of outward life, when fecur'd by a base and cowardly betraying the interests of truth and virtue; and in the world to come shall receive eternal life *.

The same is true as to the following texts, which are mentioned likewise as very objcurely and inaccurately express'd, viz. that the sense of them is easily, and almost universally, understood. Blessed be ye poor to is never taken absolutely; but interpreted of the poor in spirit, or such as have an humble mind, and moderate desires suited to their circumstances, and are contented with that condition in which providence has plac'd them. Blessed are ye that hunger to some that hunger after righteousness. Woe unto you rich of such persighteousness.

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[†] Matt. x. 37, 38, 39.

† Mar. x. 29, 30.

‡ Luke vi. 20.
†† Ver. 21. || Ver. 24.

fons only who trust, or repose their ultimate happiness, in riches, and do not lay out their wealth in acts of beneficence and liberality. Bleffed are they that mourn t, bleffed are ye that weep **, not of afflicted and disconsolate in general; but of penitent mourners for fin, and those who have a tender and compassionate fense of the forrows and miseries of their fellow-creatures. And on the contrary, Woe unto you that laugh now ++ is not interpreted as condemning a chearful sprightly temper, or innocent recreation; but of the vain, the impertinently gay, the voluptuous, who make pleafure their business; unmindful of the great concern of life, and utter strangers to those grave and folid reflections, which so well become rational beings.

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So likewise, Take no thought for the morrow ‡‡ is never understood to exclude a prudent care to provide a comfortable subsistence; or such a wise and cautious management of worldly affairs, as is most likely to enable men both to support themselves and their samilies decently and honourably at present, and to lay a foundation for lasting plenty and happiness, and guard against future missortunes; but only that perplexing and anxious concern about futurity, which makes them suspicious and desponding, destroys their relish of present pleasures, and torments them with imaginary evils, and argues besides great dis-

† Matt. v. 4. ** Ib. ver. 25. †† Luke vi, 21. †† Matt. vi. 34. Q 2 truft

trust of the wisdom and goodness of providence; which, as it has made provision for the constant support of the animal and vegetable world, can't be supposed to have neglected furnishing proper accommodations for the rational, vastly the most noble part of the creation, and to have left them alone expos'd to necessary want and misery.

AND how very few, comparatively, are they, who understand these sayings literally, He that taketh away thy coat, let him have thy cloak alfo *; and refift not evil, but who soever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also +; how exceeding few, I say, are they, in comparison, who have interpreted these texts with so rigorous a strictness, as to think all felf-defence, and guarding their property, unlawful? The expressions here us'd are proverbial, and in this view the bulk of the people have always confider'd them, and put this general most useful fense upon them, " that instead of indulging a revengeful hu-" mour, and returning evil for evil, they " ought rather to recede from their right in " little matters, and put up small affronts, as " being the most likely way, upon the whole, " to preferve the peace of fociety, and pre-" vent the increase of contention and disorder; " whereas the infifting upon full satisfaction " for every trifling injury, whether real or " imaginary, and being intent upon a frict

" retaliation, has a natural tendency to ir" ritate and inflame, more and more, the
" passions of both the parties at variance,
" and make differences and animosities per-

" petual."

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ONCE more, Sell what you have, and give alms*, is generally taken just as it was intended, not as a rule for all ages; but as peculiar to the first times of Christianity. And even then it was not properly a precept, as the author of Christianity &c. Styles it, not a law of universal and indispensable obligation; but only an exhortation to a thing that was thought expedient in a particular circumstance. Nay, the custom itself was far from being general: for we find in the epiftles to Gentile converts, and even to the dispers'd Jews, the usual distinctions of rich and poor mention'd, without the least mark of dislike or censure. It seems to me, that this use prevail'd chiefly, if not only, in the land of Judea; and very probably, for a reason peculiar to the state of that country and people. For as Christ and his Apostles knew, that the Jews would in a little time be destroy'd, and that then their property would be ravish'd from them, and their possessions become a prey to the injustice and violence of their victorious oppressors; they might, with reason, think it more adviseable, that they should be imploy'd for the general good of Christians, and the relief and support

^{*} Luke xii. 33.

of their necessitous and suffering brethren, than fall into the hands of common plunderers, and minister to their riot and luxury. However this is certain, that, even in Jerusalem, a community of goods was not absolutely infifted on; for in the case of Ananias St. Peter exprefly fays, that while his land remain'd unfold it was his own; and after it was fold, it was in his own power (free from any obligation, divine or human, to make it a common flock) and he might have done with it whatever he thought fit. In all these passages 'tis plain that the sense of scripture is very obvious, and generally understood by common Christians. And indeed, I can't see how they should be led to understand any of them in their strictest meaning, not only if they make use of their reason to direct their inquiries; but if they interpret the New Testament by itself, and take the explications there given them; which it is so far from needing any great pains and labour to find out, that they will almost necessarily occur to every ordinary reader.

'Twould be endless to follow our author through all his fancied difficulties and obscurities; however, I shall add an instance or two farther. "Things commanded (he says) are said positively not to be commanded; as, I spake not to your fathers, nor commanded them in that day I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices *." But for the very * Christianiny &c. p. 333.

reason here given, viz. because "Things com-" manded are faid not to be commanded," 'tis scarce possible that any should mistake the fense of the place, and interpret it literally. Let us take the matter in this view. This very writer is suppos'd, by the author of Christianity &c. himself, to believe, that burnt offerings and sacrifices were commanded by God; 'tis therefore a mere jest to imagine, that he could be guilty of fuch a glaring contradiction and inconfiftency as to deny this, and it will never enter into the imagination of any reader. So that there is not the least difficulty in this passage, but taking the whole of it in connection, its meaning is as obvious as any thing can be; I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them, &c. concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices; but this thing commanded I them, saying, obey my voice+; i. e. the latter, obedience to moral precepts, was what I principally requir'd, and the former I laid but little stress on in comparison of it; nay, in cases in which they may interfere, and come into competition, I never commanded burnt offerings and facrifices. Such clear obscurities, and easy difficulties as these, we may allow ever fo great a number of, without at all lessening the usefulness of the facred writings; and I beg leave myself to add two or three of the same kind, which, I know not why they are omitted, but because 'tis undeniable they are universally un-

[†] Jer. vii. 22, 23.

derstood, and a natural key for the interpretation of this, and all other texts to the like purpose. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life*; set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth +; and which is a very exact parallel for the sentiment, as well as the manner of expression, I desired mercy and not sacrifice; i. e. rather than sacrifice; for to this sense we are naturally led by the latter part of the verse, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

I SHALL conclude this head with the words of a late most excellent and learned writer, who, in observing upon "the un-" bounded manner, in which the general du-" ty of subjection to superiors, in every re-" lative station of life, is express'd; children and servants obey your parents and masters in " all things **; let wives be subject to their own husbands in every thing; fays, ++ Rea-" fon, and the nature of things, and the ge-" neral usage of all language, sheweth, that " in these and all other the like expressions, " the phrase in every thing and in all things, " must necessarily be understood to mean " only, in all things just, in all things lawful, " in all things that are honest and fit to be " done. In human writings, these general " manners of expression, arising from the

^{*} Jo. vi. 27. † Col. iii. 2. ‡ Hos. vi. 6. ** Col. iii. 20, 22. — Tit. ii. 4. † Dr. Clark's Sermons, Vol. III. p. 38—41.

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" known and vulgar use of language, are " never misunderstood: and therefore to mis-" understand them in the facred books only, " is mere perverseness. The gospel neither " inlarges nor diminishes any superior's power; " it neither adds to, nor takes from, any in-" ferior's right. In these cases it only con-" firms and explains the obligations of na-" ture; and inforces the practice of the re-" fpective duties, with stronger and more " powerful motives. As therefore in all other " writings, so in scripture likewise; the true, " the natural, and evident meaning of fuch " phrases as these, in all things, in every " thing, and the like; is not what the word, " all, fuggests in its fingle fignification; but " what the vulgar fense of it is, in such ex-" pressions and sentences. When we are " taught that the commands of God, or the " laws of truth and right, are to be obey'd in " all things; the nature of the thing, not the " force of the fingle words, shews that the " obedience is to be univerfal and without ex-" ception. In other cases, where the very " same words are used (as, in the text, Ser-" vants obey your masters in all things;) the " nature of the thing there likewife no less " plainly shews, that this obedience in all " things is to be limited, by its confiftency with " the commands of any superior master either " on earth or in heaven. In all language, the " fignification of every word necessarily de-" pends upon the other words with which it " is connected: and where no controverly is " con-

" concern'd, nor prejudice interposes, 'tis al-" ways understood, and cannot but be un-" derstood to be so, by all understandings, " and by all capacities equally, from the " highest to the meanest. When the scrip-" ture mentions the everlasting God, 'tis not " the force of the word Everlasting, but the " application of it to the first cause and au-" thor of all things, that makes it denote a " true and absolute eternity: for when the " fame scripture mentions the everlasting " mountains, 'tis understood by all men both of the greatest and of the smallest under-" standings, that it there signifies only such " a duration, as is proper to the subject of " which it is spoken. --- In the question a-" bout transubstantiation, the writers of the " church of Rome allege with great confi-" dence, that the natural, the literal, the first " and obvious fense of the words, This is my " body, is plainly in favour of their fide of " the question. And yet in reality the very " contrary to this is evidently true. For " the natural, the literal, the first and ob-" vious sense of the phrase, is not that which " arises from the fignification of the word " body fingly, but that which arises from its " natural fignification in fucb an expression, " wherein commemorative bread is affirm'd to " be the body of him who is commemorated " thereby. When a picture is spoken of, as " being the person it represents; the natural, " the literal, the first and obvious sense of " the expression, is not that 'tis really, but " that

that 'tis representatively. When our Lord " fays, I am the true vine; the question is " not what the word, vine, naturally fignifies " in other cases; but what it there most na-" turally and obvioufly fignifies, when a teacher " calls bimself a vine, and his followers its " branches." In like manner, when a person fent from God to instruct mankind declares, that he that eateth his flesh, and drinketh his blood, bath eternal life *; 'tis the most unnatural thing in the world (and what, we may be fure, none would ever think of but in the heat of dispute, and under such violent prejudices as will pervert and darken even felfevident truths) to understand him literally; or to apprehend that he meant any thing more by it, than entertaining and improving his doctrine, which tended to promote purity and virtue, the life and health of the foul; and by that means to prepare men for a happy immortality. Our Saviour has indeed himfelf directly pointed out this fense to us, by faying, The words which I speak unto you they are spirit, and life +; and the figure here us'd is the very same which we find in the book of Proverbs, when wildom is defcrib'd as killing her beafts, mingling her wine, and furnishing her table, as sending forth her maidens, and crying upon the highest places of the city, -come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled; i. e. as it immediately follows, forfake the

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^{*} Jo. vi. 54. † Ver. 63.

236 The usefulness and truth of the foolish and live, and go in the way of understanding *.

HAVING proved thus largely, that the people do not in fact mifunderstand a great number of the figurative and proverbial expressions us'd in scripture; and are not at a loss about the meaning of those precepts, which, according to the author of Christianity &c. " are deliver'd after a general, undertermin'd, nay, hyperbolical manner;" and consequently that such a way of writing does not, in the nature of the thing itself, hinder, but that the books of the Old and New Testament may, upon the whole, be a plain rule of conduct, sitted for general instruction, and use: I shall proceed one step farther, and endeavour to shew,

6. That the people might as eafily understand those texts, the true meaning of which they misapprehend and pervert; or, in other words, that following the same rules would as certainly discover the sense of the latter, as it does that of the former; and that there is as plain and full a guard, in the books themselves, against the errors which they fall into, so far as they affect important principles of religion, or moral obligations, (and these are all the errors that it is of any consequence to prevent) as against those which they escape; so that the rule itself is equally clear

Christian revelation defended. 237 and intelligible in both cases, and 'tis nothing but mens indolence and prejudice that make the difference, with respect to their understanding the several parts of it.

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For instance, when bodily parts, and buman infirmities and passions, are ascrib'd to God, I have shewn, that there are very few who take these passages strictly, and literally; not only because the literal sense contradicts those natural notions of the Deity which reason suggests, but is directly repugnant to plain and express declarations of scripture, that he is an infinite invisible spirit *. And may they not as eafily fee, that God could not in a proper sense, or by an immediate operation and influence on his mind, barden Pharaoh's beart; fince this is as evidently contrary to reason, and to the most clear and politive testimony of revelation, that he cannot be tempted with evil, nor tempteth any man +; and especially when it is said to be done only in fuch a way, as is confiftent with Pharaoh's bardening his own heart ‡? As our Saviour faid of himself, that he came not to fend peace on earth, but a fword **, purely, because his religion would prove the occafion of much confusion and violence in the world, quite contrary to its design, and natural and most manifest tendency; so God is faid to have bardened Pharaoh's beart, be-

^{*} Jo. iv. 24. 1 Tim. vi. 16. † Jam. i. 13. ‡ Ex. viii. 32. ** Matt. x. 34.

cause his removing his judgments, and suffering the Magicians to perform, for a time, the same miracles that Moses and Aaron did, was the occasion of his hardening his own heart. This is the account given in the history itself *; and nothing can be more plain both from the relation we have of the sact, and the general doctrine of revelation, than that this dreadful effect was not, and could not be, owing to an absolute decree of God that he should not repent, or to any positive and efficacious influence upon his mind, but solely to his own obstinacy and wickedness.

AGAIN, those texts that speak of God as repenting are scarce ever interpreted in the common and usual sense of the word, because it is immediately perceiv'd to be absurd and irrational; but chiefly, because there are other passages which represent it as a thing impossible, that he should strictly and properly repent. Must we not wonder then, how any can possibly be induc'd to believe by the mere found of two or three texts, which, in their most natural and obvious construction, have a quite different meaning, that the All-perfect governour of the world is an arbitrary tyrannical being, who, for the oftentation of his uncontroulable fovereignty, has absolutely determin'd the final and eternal mifery of great numbers of his rational creatures? Must we not wonder, I say, how any can be prevail'd

upon to believe this, in direct opposition to what the light of nature teaches concerning his universal and unlimited goodness; and to the plainest testimonies of scripture, that he is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works*; that he hath no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his way and live; is willing all men should be saved; and so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved **?

AND to mention but one passage more: Is it not as easy and natural for the meanest of the people to understand these words, Jacob have I lov'd, and Esau have I hated, ++ only comparatively; or of God's giving the preference to the one above the other; as to take the same expression thus (which they do univer-(ally) when our Saviour speaks of hating father and mother, wife and children ##, &c? And is it not most evident besides from the book of Malachi, from whence the text is cited by St. Paul, that the effects of this love and hatred affected not directly the persons of Jacob and E-Sau; but their descendants the Jews, and Edomites; by the distinction made between these two nations, in the course of God's providence,

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^{*} Pf. cx'v. 9. † Ezek. xxxiii. 11. ‡ 1 Tim. ii. 4. ** Jo. iii. 16. 17. †† Rom. ix. 13. ‡‡ Luke xiv. 10.

with respect to their temporal prosperity, and outward privileges? I have loved you, saith the Lord; yet ye say, wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother, saith the Lord? yet I loved Jacob, and took his posterity under my special protection and care; and I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste*.

I MIGHT add feveral other instances to prove the same point, viz. that the true doctrine of revelation is as plain in cases where it is mistaken, as in others, in which it is generally understood; but these may suffice as a specimen. Some texts are rightly interpreted, others grofly perverted; but there are the very same helps and advantages for understanding the latter, as the former; and the fame guards against abfurd and erroneous senses; the natural consequence of which is, that the rule itself is equally clear and intelligible with respect to both; and that the true reason why men think justly on the one, and not on the other is, because in the one inquiry they proceed impartially, and, being under no biass, take the first and most obvious sense of scripture; whereas in the other they are negligent and careless, or else their judgment is already determin'd in favour of some party-scheme.

'T is a very fallacious way of reasoning, to suppose those texts only to be clear, which

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^{*} Mal. i. 2, 3.

are univerfally understood, and those to be very obscure, especially if there be any thing figurative in the expressions, that are by great numbers misinterpreted: for as the texts, which are generally understood, would have been never the less plain in themselves, if they had been commonly mistaken; so the other would not have been at all the more plain, if they had happen'd to be understood. understanding any rule does not depend more on the clearness of the rule itself, than on the diligence, bonesty, and unprejudic'd temper of those who are to be guided by it. So that 'tis of no moment in the present debate, that men, " by interpreting texts literally, have run " into monstrous absurdities *." For, under the influence of enthufiaftic delutions and prejudices, they have abus'd full as monstrously the religion of nature. Reason itself has made but a forry figure as a guide, when it has been overwhelm'd by ignorance, and fuperstition. In like manner, it must be own'd, that revelation has been very much darken'd by mysterious comments, and straining single texts to countenance establish'd opinions, and support the jargon of school-divinity; and when the people take it for granted, that this is the religion of the Bible, all they have to do is, in the best manner they can, to accommodate scripture to it. But this is not at all the question; the only point in controverfy is, whether the Christian revelation,

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 339.

however it is in fact understood, be not in itself, in all matters of real importance, an

easy and intelligible rule?

AND what has been already faid, I think. is fufficient to evince this. For those parts of the New Testament, which are express'd in the most plain and simple manner, give a complete and most rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and a noble scheme of morality; so that the meanest of the people, without concerning themfelves at all with figurative and proverbial phrases, allegories, parables, &c. nay, if we suppose that they are not capable of understanding them, have an excellent system of natural religion, recommended upon more certain principles, and enforced by stronger motives, than mere reason ever did, or perhaps can suggest. And those plain accounts, the sense of which is easy and obvious to all, are a good general explication of all the dark passages. 'Tis evident farther, that the literal sense, in many cases, is not the most plain even to the vulgar; but on the contrary must appear strain'd and unnatural. And accordingly it has been shewn, that they, almost universally, agree in the right fense of a great number of passages, which are express'd after a general, undetermin'd, and figurative manner; and might as eafily; understand others which they misrepresent and pervert; and that there is a sufficient guard, in the writings themselves, against all errors

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errors of consequence, with respect to any grand points of religion and morality: so that if the people will but make a common use of their reason, and follow the natural and easy method of interpreting dark passages by such as are clear and determinate; they are in no danger of being misled, by the peculiar style and phrase of scripture, into unworthy conceptions of God, or of mistaking the general nature of true religion.

AND allowing, what is a necessary consequence from these premises, that Christianity is plain in all its practical doctrines, and as a moral rule, which, without doubt, must be the chief design of any revelation, and not to amuse the world with abstract controversies; other obscurities about antient customs, manners, sects, philosophy, &c. nay, about any points merely speculative, fignify just nothing. For as God never would have given a revelation, if the errors of the world had not been of a practical nature, but confifted only in abfurd theories; so differences about fuch things may always continue, and yet all the ends and uses of the Christian revelation, as a standing rule, be completely anfwered. I might rest the matter here, but can't forbear remarking once more,

7. THAT the author of Christianity &c. represents some texts quite contrary to their manifest design; and others as obscurities and improprieties, which, taken in their strictest R 2 sense.

sense, are most plain and rational accounts of things, nay, real beauties, and excellencies, in the moral scheme of revelation. For instance, he tells us, that " the Jewish rites " and facrifices are, in the Old Testament, " absolutely condemn'd, as an iniquity, and " an abomination to the Lord, which were " only fo conditionally *." And indeed, in the place which he refers to, these words are to be found; but any one that reads the whole paragraph must immediately see, that they are not describ'd as iniquity, and an abomination absolutely, and in themselves; but the particular reason is expresly affign'd, viz. the wickedness and immorality of the worshippers, and their thinking to be acceptable to the Supreme Being for such external services, while they were guilty of the worst of vices; Your bands are full of blood +. This method of picking little scraps out of a connected discourse, by which means the most moral authors may be made to talk impiously, and the gravest, and most judicious, ludicrously and ridiculoufly, is utterly inexcusable in one that fets up for a critic; and the more so, when criticisms are design'd to point out the defects of writings, and lessen their reputation; of writings which are of the greatest importance, and generally in the highest esteem. For, be it either a careless or wilful mistake, 'tis not only an injury to the authors, but an affront and imposition upon the world.

* Page 235. † 1fa. i. 15.

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AGAIN: our author mentions among his difficulties this text, prove all things; as if he was afraid that it would be taken, in its literal meaning, to be an exhortation to demonstrate and judge of mathematical propoficions, and abstract metaphysical truths, whereas 'tis only part of a fentence, the whole of which, in the judgment of all that read it, must necessarily be confin'd to religion and morality. And the natural sense of it is, that Christians should believe nothing implicitly, but use their understandings to judge of the nature and consequences of all things that are recommended to them as divine truths, and of their evidence; and when they have form'd their judgment upon mature reflection and examination, bold fast that which is good, i. e. adhere inflexibly to what they apprehend to be right and fit; and abstain from all appearance of evil*. And certainly in this view, which is the view in which it is always confider'd, 'tis a most excellent piece of advice, useful for all mankind, and in all ages; and I am furpriz'd to find it objected against by one, who is to great a friend to free inquiry, and would be as likely as any man to quote, and use it himself, upon other occasions, as an express declaration against bigotry, and implicit faith.

AND must it not be very strange to find it urg'd as an impropiety, and great difficulty,

* 1 Thef. 5. 21, 22.

that, "persuasion is call'd compulsion, as, "compel them to come in *," by one, who writes in a language in which no expressions are more common, than "the force of elo"quence, the force of persuasion, the force of example, the force of importunity," and the like? The best way of answering such objections would be to pass them over in silence, were it not to shew the world what little things are rak'd together in order to render Christianity useless; things, which, in any other argument, I am persuaded, would be thought below censure.

Bur let us consider what he says upon other passages. Why God's permitting evil is called doing it: Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord bath not done it +? Nay, the Lord is said to have created evil 1. And here I suppose likewise he takes the phrase creating evil to fignify no more than the fermission of it. If so, he has not, in my opinion, a just notion of the sense of the texts, nor of the concern of providence in this affair. For the evil spoken of, in both these passages, is evidently what we call natural evil only. Now a great deal of this may properly and Arichly be faid to be of God's appointing, or creating, because it necessarily results from the original frame and constitution of things. And even when beings who act freely are the woluntary instruments pain and misery to

^{*} P. 335. Luke 14. 23. † Amos 3. 6. ‡ 16. 45. 7. each

each other, it must be consider'd, that this is one law by which God governs the world, that free agents shall, at least in all common cases, be left to the full exercise of their natural liberty; and besides, the permission of these evils is not the indolence and carelesness of one, who is unconcern'd about the state of the universe, and the course of human affairs; but must be look'd on in this view, viz. as his suffering things to go on in such or such a particular channel, because it is upon the whole wise and sit, and agrees with the general scheme of his providence.

AGAIN: when St. Peter fays, that, by the gospel, are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by them we might be partakers of the divine nature*; does our author imagine, that any will think we are capable of being partakers of the necessary eternity, and immensity of God? Is not the most obvious, and only intelligible, sense of the phrase, that we may refemble him in his moral attributes; or, which is the frequent acceptation of the Greek word, and a very common use of the word nature in our own language, be of a God-like temper and disposition? And is not this the noblest end that rational beings can propose, and consequently the kighest that any revelation can pursue? And the same may be faid of our Saviour's exhortation to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect +:

^{* 2} Pet : 4. † Mat. 5. 48.

when taken generally, it can fignify no more in its first, and most natural meaning, than st imitate the moral perfections of God;" and is never understood otherwise. But indeed the firitt sense of it, as it is the conclufion of a discourse upon that particular subject, is, that we should practife the most generous, difinterested, and perfect degree of charity and mercy, even good-will and beneficence to our enemies, after the example of our beavenly Father, and that we may be his children, who maketh his fun to rife on the evil, and on the good, and jendeth rain on the just, and on the unjust +. And therefore 'tis express'd by St. Luke thus, Be ye merciful, as your Father alfois merciful t.

But this leads me to consider what our author has said with relation to the precepts of forgiving injuries, and loving enemies, which have always been thought very great excellencies in the Christian scheme; and will still appear to be so, notwithstanding the objections he has made to them, which are, in reality, very slight and inconsiderable. He expresses his opinion about this matter in general, in the words of Celsus, that "the doction of the Christians, though they taught it after a grosser manner *." And why? Because the command is given in a general

[†] Mat v. 47. † Luke vi. 36.

* Christianuy &c. p. 341. Origen. contra Celsum, lib. 7.

pag. 373.

indefi-

indefinite way; whereas there are certain necessary restrictions and limitations, without which it would be attended with fatal consequences. It must be "interpreted consistent" ly with what the light of nature dictates to be our duty, in preserving our reputation, liberty, and property; and in doing all we can in our several stations, to hinder all injury and injustice from others, as well as ourselves +." Undoubtedly it must: but those exceptions are so plain, that they will always be supposed, and consequently there was no need of their being distinctly specified.

THE Christian religion makes no alteration in the natural rights of mankind; it no where forbids necessary self-defence; or seeking a legal redress of injuries in cases, wherein it may be expedient to restrain violence and outrage, to maintain private right and property, and secure to the honest and peaceable the advantages of civil life; but all the explications it gives of the duty of forgiving injuries are perfectly confistent with this. For the substance of what it recommends and inculcates upon this head relates chiefly to the temper of the mind; that we be ready to pals by small affronts, and not forward to execute private revenge; that we be dispos'd to put the most candid interpretation upon the deligns and actions of those who have

injur'd us, and make all the favourable allowances that the nature of the case will admit; and that while we suffer the greatest wrongs, we maintain a general benevolence and good-will to our enemies, a fincere defire of their happiness, and a constant disposition, upon all proper occasions, to promote it, and return good for evil. This, I fay, is the true notion of forgiving injuries, as it is stated and explain'd in the New Testament. The gospel therefore proposes the example of God, in his conduct toward finful men, as the general rule and measure of that lenity and forbearance, which we ought to exercise toward each other. Now the utmost that can be inferr'd from hence is, that if our offending brother is so ingenuous as to acknowledge his offence, and, by making all the reparation that is in his power, gives us sufficient reason to think his repentance fincere, we are bound to receive him again into our friendship, and ought never to upbraid him with former faults, but to be as beartily and entirely reconcil'd to him, as if he had never given us any just ground of complaint; as we expect, that God, upon our unfeign'd repentance and reforming the errors of our past conduct, will receive us into full favour, and remember our iniquities no more; and that in other cases, after the example of the same most merciful and compassionate Being, we incline rather to gentle methods, than to demand a basty, strict, and rigorous satisfaction for every affront that is offer'd us; nay, that we still pre-

shough he is unrelenting, and inflexible. There is nothing at all in this, which, every one who has examin'd particular passages, must see to be the doctrine of the Christian revelation, that in the least disallows of that self-defence, which reason and the laws of our country direct to.

NAY, 'tis far from being a paradox, that a man may forgive an injury, at the same that he feeks a legal redress of it. For he is to be confider'd, both as a person who has receiv'd a private injury, and as a member of fociety. which fustains likewise some damage by the injustice and violence that every one of its members suffers. Now 'tis most evident, that he has no right to forgive the wrong, so far as the general interests of fociety are concern'd; and therefore must be oblig'd, when 'tis necessary to do justice to the community, and for the public good, to prosecute the offender. But then he may be faid to forgive the injury, so far as 'tis perfonal, and relates to himself as the immediate fufferer, if, according to what the gospel teaches, instead of indulging rancour and malice, and forming mischievous defigns against his enemy; he heartily wishes his welfare, and is ready generously to assist him, and do him any private services, that are not inconfiftent with necessary self-defence, and the general bappiness.

LET me add, that the precept of forgiving injuries, if it had stood in the Christian scheme fingly, and without any farther explication, would have been altogether as plain as Confucius's rule, " never to revenge in-" juries;" the latter being full as general and undetermin'd as the former, and requiring the very same limitations, and exceptions. For it will be ask'd, what is revenge? And if it be answer'd, that it is not "legally prose-" cuting a man who has injur'd me;" it will be said likewise, that this is not forbidden by the precept of forgiving injuries; and the reason of the thing must as soon, and as eaply, be apprehended in the one case, as in the other. So that the author of Christianity &c. has shewn only his great partiality, in preferring Confucius's maxim to that of our Saviour; and might as well, and, 'tis not unlikely, would have done the very fame thing, if the Christian precept had been found in Confucius, and his in the gospel.

HE goes on to find fault with the phrase of loving our enemies: and the sum of his argument is, that "the passions of love and hatred given us by God, are to be exercis'd on proper objects. Actions, abstractedly consider'd, are not the objects of love and hate, but persons for the sake of their actions; and the actions of some men are too detestable to create in us any sentiments, but of aversion; so as to oblige us

"to bring them to a condign punishment.—
"If love carries with it complaisance, estee m
"and friendship, and these are due to all
"men; what distinction can we then make
"between the best and worst of men *?"
Mere cavilling this about the use of a word;
and, I may add, idle useless cavilling, since
'tis universally known what was intended by
it.

Our author himself can't imagine surely, nor can it ever enter into any reader's thoughts, that when our Saviour exhorted to love our enemies, he defign'd to recommend an inward esteem of the malicious slanderer, the oppresfor, and cruel persecutor, who have discarded all fentiments of bonour, justice, and bumanity; or a complacency in persons of such vile characters; but only the having kind and benevolent dispositions towards them, and a fincere desire of their bappiness. And fince 'tis obvious to all, that he could mean no more than this, what if it does not come up to the full sense of the word, as 'tis generally us'd at present? This will not so much as prove an impropriety of speech. For might it not be a very common acceptation of it, at the time when our Saviour deliver'd this precept? And have not all people a right to put what senses upon words they please? Or is it reasonable for us to find fault with any language, merely because the same ideas

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 342.

are not fix'd to particular words, as in our

But it happens in fact, (which shews that the objection is entirely groundless) that in all moral writings, whether antient, or modern, love most generally fignifies, what it does in this precept of the Christian religion, benevolence or good-will; and may be exercis'd towards particular objects, not only where there can be no esteem, and complacency; but even while we are oblig'd to punish them. Thus it is always allow'd, that a parent may love a wicked and disobedient child, though he has the greatest abborrence and detestation of his crimes; and to this it is imputed, that he has fuch an affectionate concern for his welfare, and earnest defire of his reformation. Nay, even rigor and severity, and a proper punishment of his faults, are suppos'd to be not only confistent with love, but to spring directly from it. I can't help observing upon the whole, that it does not appear, that the author of Christianity &c. means any thing more by not revenging injuries, than that I am not " to punish for punishment-fake;" and that " common prudence will oblige me, " fometimes, to overlook flight injuries ";" it does not appear, I say, that he thinks himfelf bound, over and above this, to cultivate a benevolent temper, and a disposition to do kind offices for an enemy. And if this be

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 341.

Christian revelation defended. 255 really the case, both his own morals, and those of his oracle Confucius, are vastly inferior to the Christian morality, which inculcates much more noble and generous virtue.

FINALLY, we are ask'd, Whether " rules " concerning morality should not be suited " to mens particular circumstances, plainly " describing the conduct which they require? " Whether this is not the design of the muni-" cipal laws in every country? And what " benefit subjects could have, from laws writ-"ten in fuch a loofe, general and unde-" termin'd manner; as lend, hoping for no-"thing again, &c.?-"Tis said, We are to " render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's; " but must we not learn from the laws in " every nation, who is Cæfar? And what is " his due? - We are to render all men their " dues; but what those dues are, we are to " learn from the reason of things, and the " laws of the country *."

The drift of all this strange reasoning must be to prove, if any thing, that general rules of conduct are of no service to mankind; whereas, in truth, the whole of natural religion and morality itself consists in general principles, that are of universal and immutable obligation and use, and easily accommodated to particular circumstances. A writer of morals, according to this way of thinking, must

be reckon'd to talk loofely, who advises in general " to be charitable to the poor; to give to " those who are in want; and be ready to " affift, and support others in their necessities, " without any prospect of a recompense;" which is the plain and obvious fense of Lend, boping for nothing again; or if he exhorts " to yield due obedience and submission to " magistrates; or to do justice to all men;" and 'tis absolutely necessary for him to specify, for every man, the particular kind, the proper objects, nay, I can't see how we can help going so far as the very proportion of his charity; to understand the laws and constitutions of every country; and the particular demands which each man has upon another. Whereas on the contrary, rules suited to mens particular circumstances can't possibly be given in a discourse of this kind; or, if they could, as circumstances perpetually alter, they would not be parts of that eternal and immutable law of nature, which it must be the great design of a revelation to recommend, and inforce. There is not one natural obligation this author can name, incumbent upon all mankind, but must be express'd in a general undetermin'd manner; for if it be particular and circumstantial, it can only be a rule for individuals, and not for the whole rational species. And 'tis altogether as absurd to expect in a revelation defign'd for the use of all nations, and to last to the end of the world, none but rules fuited to particular circumstances, as to talk of an eternal temporary law, or an universal parti-

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particular. The rule of rendering to all men their dues, if interpreted in general of the payment of just debts, is altogether as plain, as If the particular dues were specified; that of rendering to Casar the things that are Casar's, as if we were expresly told who was meant by Cæsar; as king George for England; Lewis the fifteenth for France, and the like: and the same may be said of the duty of relieving the necessitious in general, fixing on the most proper objects, and in proportion to our circumstances; that it is an easy and intelligible rule, in applying which to particular cases, men of the least reflection can bardly ever mistake. Indeed, as I have already obferv'd, 'tis a most wild and extravagant attempt for a moralist to endeavour to fix these things precifely, and therefore he must content himself with giving general directions.

I SHOULD have proceeded farther in the vindication of particular passages of scripture, but that I have reason to hope this part will be undertaken by a very able hand, who, I make no doubt, will do justice to the argument, and give entire satisfaction to the world. Those which I have consider'd have fallen in incidentally, in pursuance of my design to shew, that the Christian revelation, notwithstanding the peculiarity of its style and manner of expression, and all the difficulties and obscurities that are charg'd on it, is, upon the whole, very plain, and useful, as a standing rule of religion and morals;

and that all its effential doctrines, containing helps, encouragements, and motives to virtue, are very obvious and easy to be understood by the bulk of mankind. And after this, all other obscurities, about ancient customs and the like extraneous circumstances, and points merely speculative, will be look'd upon as trifles by the judicious and impartial; and be thought not at all to interfere with the defign and use of the Scriptures, as a divine revelation. However, every reader will fee, that what I have faid upon some of the texts cited by the author of Christianity &c. will ferve to explain and defend many others, which, to avoid being tedious, I have not mention'd. But because he has endeavour'd particularly to expose several passages in the bistorical books of the Old Testament, I would, before I conclude this chapter, add one remark more, namely, that though these passages may be vindicated, as far as 'tis reasonable to expect we should be able to account for all the things contain'd in books written at so great a distance, when the customs and ways of writing were so different from what they are at prefent; yet before we allow ourselves to be oblig'd to undertake the defence of them, there is a previous question proper to be consider'd, viz. how far we are bound, by the quotations and references in the New Testament, to acknowledge the divine authority of the Old, and especially of every bistorical account that is given in it. And I mention this the rather, because

cause 'tis most certain, that, in the nature of the thing itself, there is no connection between the two ideas, for instance, of Moses being affisted by God, in an extraordinary manner, in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, and forming their religion and polity; and his infallibility as an bistorian. Nay, he may be a credible and unexceptionable witness to all the facts which he relates upon his own knowledge, or of whose truth and certainty he had himself opportunities of being fully inform'd; even though he should not be exactly right in every circumstance of his history of the world, and the state of religion, before his own times; in compiling which, if he had no other helps than from the best records and traditions he could meet with, there may be some defects, and yet the account upon the whole be authentic, and highly valuable. And if upon stating and examining this question fairly it appears, that we are not oblig'd, in order to support the Christian revelation, to defend all the historical passages of the Old Testament, we are eased of an unnecessary trouble; if the contrary, we shall, at least, have the satisfaction to know that we proceed in a just and regular method, and do not reason in the dark.

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CHAP.

CHAP. IV.

A GENERAL defence of positive commands.

T Come now to confider the case of positive duties. Our author supposes, that if Christianity be a divine revelation, it can be nothing else but a revival of the universal and immutable law of nature; that it enjoins no duties but what are as old as the creation, and as extensive as buman nature; nothing which, as to the manner of it only, is indifferent *; and consequently, that there cannot be the least difference between natural and reveal'd religion, but in the method of their discovery; and " if instituted religion varies " from the religion of nature and reason in " any one particular, nay, in the minutest " circumstance, that alone is an argument, " which makes all things else that can be said " for its support totally ineffectal +." This is the point to be determined; and it must be own'd, that it is a point of very great importance; because, as it is undeniable, that the gospel inflitution does command feveral things that are merely positive, we must be able to shew that such injunctions are not repugnant to reason, nor subversive of moral obligations, nor inconfistent with the wisdom, justice, and

^{*} Christianity &c. p 122. + P. 60.

goodness of God, in order to make a rational defence of it. And that we may argue diftinctly and without confusion upon this subject, and shorten the controversy as much as possible, let us see what concessions are proper to be made, and lay down fome common principles in which both parties may agree.

- 1. THEN, it must be allow'd, that the substance of true religion always bas been, and ever will be, the same in all ages, and nations; confisting in the belief of fuch principles, and the practice of fuch duties only, as are founded on the nature and reason of things; and that this universal eternal and immutable religion cannot be superseded, alter'd, or contradicted by an external revelation.
- 2. THAT the religion of nature is the whole of religion that is valuable for it felf, as having an intrinsic and necessary goodness; and consequently positive institutions must be entirely fubservient to it. They are not defign'd, as this author very frequently, but loosely, infinuates, to mend the religion of nature, but excite to the practice of it; and are only fo far valuable, as they strengthen moral obligations; either by cultivating and improving in our minds fuch fentiments, as have a tendency to promote true and fubstantial virtue; or by guarding against particular errors, and superstitious customs, to which mankind had been long addicted, and which S 3 -

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were found by experience to have obscur'd, perverted, and almost intirely destroyed that true religion of rational beings, which results from the immutable relations of things. So that they are insignificant and tristing observances, if they are not belps and motives to the practice of morality, and if they are substituted in the place of it, or undermine it in any instance, burtful and impious.

'Tis indeed very strange, that any who confider the necessary differences of things, should confound the subordination of positive to moral duties, which is as plain, as that ends are more excellent than means; and that they should think there is any comparison, in point of real value and excellency, between that, which confider'd in it jelf has nothing at all to recommend it, and would be absolutely indifferent and useles, were it not for the end which it is defign'd to promote, and the end itself, the eternal unchangeable religion of nature, which is effentially and intrinfically good. 'Tis the confideration of the end alone that consecrates, and gives a value to the means, and confequently that must be of infinitely superior efficacy; and we can have no rule of judging, if what is in itself good for nothing deferves an equal regard with the most excellent and useful thing in the world.

AND agreeably to these most plain dictates of reason, we find that the scriptures both of the Old and New Testament constantly affert,

affert, that institute, religion is for the sake of natural; and declare in the strongest terms. that positive duties, without moral righteousness, are not only mean and despicable, but highly offensive to God; that he lays no stress at all upon them in comparison with the rational duties of piety to himself, and justice and mercy to our fellow creatures; and that we cannot entertain more unworthy and dishonourable thoughts of him than by imagining, that he is as much pleas'd with external Services, that are, in themselves, of no worth or importance, as with an imitation of his perfections, and obedience to moral laws, which is the highest improvement and rectitude of human nature, and the fource both of private and focial happiness. This, I say, is the constant strain of revelation, as well as the voice of reason. And the observation of positive institutions may, with reason, be strictly insisted upon, for the tendency it has to promote true goodness; nay, tho God may immediately interpose, and punish the wilful contempt of a positive law more severely, in this world, than the violation of a moral precept; as what may be necessary, upon its first appointment, to give the former a fanction, and maintain its facredness, and authority, fince it wants that intrinsic goodness, which recommends and supports the latter; this is far from proving, that the duties of instituted and natural religion are upon a level, and much farther from giving the preference to positive duties above moral. The only way S 4 to

to come to a rational determination in this point is, to confider, when things are circumfanc'd that one or other of these duties must necessarily be omitted, which of the two must give way; and if it be an everlasting rule, that, in every supposeable instance of competition, positive duties must yield to moral, this is a demonstration that moral duties are superior, and claim our ultimate regard.

3. FROM these principles it necessarily follows, that as nothing which contradicts natural religion, or weakens any of its obligations, can be part of a revelation which hath God for its author; and no man who is wilfully deficient in any branch of moral duty can rationally expect to obtain the favour of God, be he eyer so scrupulous and exact with respect to ritual and instrumental observances; and confequently that it is the height of folly and presumption, by the utmost care and zeal about instituted religion, to hope to compound for irregularities and excesses of the sensual passions, or for pride, uncharitableness, cruelty and revenge, or any other notorious and hurtful immoralities: fo, on the contrary, those who fincerely practise the great duties of natural religion, comprehended under the two heads of the love of God, and our neighbour, will not be condemned for their ignorance of the peculiar doctrines of revelation, or for not understanding, or not seeing the reason and obligation of positive precepts; because they have attain'd the great end of religion, which

which all the fubordinate duties of it must be design'd to promote, viz. rational piety and likeness to God, the right government of their passions, and fixing in their minds habits of justice, and universal benevolence.

HOWEVER, this does not hinder, but that if men wilfully neglect any part of instituted religion, they may be justly punish'd; fince fuch a wilful contempt even of positive duries, apprehended to be commanded by God, is as truly an affront to his wisdom and autherity, as a contempt of moral laws: 'Tis a violation of an eternal rule of righteousness, viz. that God is to be reverenc'd and obey'd in ALL the known fignifications and discoveries of his will; and confequently an immorality. So that even in this case they forfeit the divine favour, not merely for a failure in matters of external ceremony (by which alone, the state of mankind with respect to God's most wife and impartial judgment, and their final happiness or misery, will never be determin'd) but for transgressing the fundamental law of natural religion itself.

By allowing these things, viz. the superior excellency of natural religion; the moral tendency of instituted means; and the necessary subordination of positive to immutable moral duties; it will appear, that a great part of the reasonings of the author of Ciristianity &cc. is fully answer'd; who has inaccurately, as I would hope only, and not designedly, in or-

der to missead the superficial and incautious reader, confounded, throughout his whole book, the false sentiments of the weak and superstitious with the nature of the thing itself. Let us now proceed to consider what he has advanc'd upon this head; and whether it is of any weight against positive duties, as the design, importance, and use of them has been stated and explain'd.

The argument which the ingenious author feems to lay most stress on, and to think it never could be urg'd too often, is this; that the religion, which God gave men from the beginning, was, without doubt, most perfect; since no religion can come from a Being of infinite wisdom and perfection, but what is absolutely perfect. Can therefore a religion absolutely perfect, admit of any alteration; or be capable of addition, or diminution; and not be as immutable as the author of it? Can revelation add any thing to a religion thus absolutely perfect, universal, and immutable *?"

Now in order to see clearly, whether there be any thing in this boasted demonstration, that holds against positive duties rightly understood, 'tis necessary for us to consider, what we must mean when we speak of natural religion as perfect. And in general, there must be some rule or measure of

perfection, by which it is to be tried. A thing may be faid to be perfect, when, all present circumstances consider'd, it is sufficient to answer its end. A law or rule of conduct therefore, the perfection of which must be judg'd by its suitableness to the condition of those to whom it is given, and its sufficiency to direct to every thing that is fit, and becoming persons so constituted, and circumstanc'd, may be perfect in that view, or completely adapted to answer its design, and yet comparatively impersect: it may be perfect in present circumstances, and very desective in others.

To apply this to natural religion. The original religion or law of nature, which consider'd men only as men, in the integrity and rectitude of their faculties, and not as ignorant, superstitious, and degenerate, was undoubtedly perfect; i. e. it was fuited to their circumstances, and sufficient to teach them their duty, merely as reasonable creatures, and furnish them with all necessary motives to excite to the practice of it; and if they had observ'd it, a revelation would perhaps have been needless. But when they had corrupted, and in a great measure lost the knowledge of the law of their creation, and God, having compassion upon their ignorance and deprawity, thought fit to afford a revelation; though the ultimate defign of that revelation be, to recover them from their errors and vices to the knowledge and practice of the true reli-

gion of nature, all must allow, that their circumstances are vastly different from what they were originally; and from those different circumstances different duties necessarily refult. Thus it becomes their duty to acknowledge the divine authority of the messenger, that is fent for their recovery; not only as 'tis in itself fit, that in every instance, they should act agreeably to the truth of things, and characters; but because without this, they cannot receive the revelation itself, nor consequently the advantage that God intended them by it *. And it may be proper for them moreover frequently to confider, and impress fome principles upon their minds, as motives and helps to the practice of true religion, and

* THOUGH " faith consider'd in itself" [i.e. barely as the act of the mind in affenting to the truth of propositions] " can neither be a virtue, or a vice; because men can no

† Christianity &c. "otherwise believe than as things appage 51. "pear to them †:" yet that they appear in such a particular manner to the understanding, may be owing entirely

to themselves. Faith therefore may be fitly rewarded as the result of serious consideration, and impartial enquiry; and unbelief justly punish'd as proceeding from wilful negligence, and vicious prejudices. And whenever there is sufficient evidence of the truth of a proposition, and it may reasonably be expected, taking in all circumstances, that men should consider and examine this evidence, which, if fairly consider'd and examin'd, will not fail of convincing the judgment; to believe, must be a duty, and not to believe a vice. This is the sense (as will be evident to every one who reads the New Testament with attention) in which these words are always to be understood, when faith is requir'd as necessary to obtain acceptance with God, and unbelief condemn'd. The one is consider'd as a virtue, and the other as a crime, only as they spring from good, or bad principles; from moral restitude, or depravity of mind.

to prevent relapsing into their former superstition, and wickedness, which the reason of mankind could not discover from the beginning; because they necessarily suppose certain things which did not then exist, viz. that they have departed from the primitive law of their creation, and that a revelation has been given to fet them right again. So that mens particular religious obligations may, and must, in fome things, be different by revelation, from what they would have been, had they been left to the mere unassisted light and dictates of reason; and yet it may be allow'd, that the law of reason, the original law of human nature, was perfect; i. e. sufficient, if rightly attended to, and observ'd, to answer its end.

If the ingenious author shall affert, that those duties, which are only sit, upon supposing a revelation given, are, however, parts of the law of nature, which "takes in every "thing that is founded on the reason and nature of things *;" that "like the law of nature of things *;" that "like the law of nature adjusted, "and accommodated to circumstances †;" and that "if our natural notions of the dimensions demonstrate, that God will require nothing of his creatures but what tends to their good; whatsoever is of this "kind, is a superstructure that belongs to the

^{*} Christianity &cc. p. 13.

" law of nature; or, in other words, what " the reason of nature of the things themselves " plainly point out to us." Let it be fo; the religion of nature then may be not only the original religion of mere reason; but duties that could not be known without a revelation, and which are only proper upon supposing a revelation. And though this way of speaking may feem to many new; and inaccurate, and is, by no means, to be reconcil'd to the general strain of this author's reasoning; we may be very well contented if he will allow, that faith in Christ, for instance, the belief of a revelation which is not universal (for such, I have already shewn, it is confistent with the perfections of God for him to give) and impressing frequently and strongly upon the mind fuch principles, and keeping up the remembrance of such important facts, which, though grounded intirely upon the acknowledgment of a revelation, have, a moral tendency; that these things, I say, are parts of that religion which is as old as the creation, and as extensive as buman nature.

AFTER what has been faid concerning the fitness and advantage of the thing itself; and such concessions, all that remains to be settled is, whether God may not appoint the manner, in which a thing, that is useful in itself, shall be done; or whether it must be left to every man to do it when, and in what way he thinks sit? In the positive institutions we are speaking of, which tend to fix principles

ples and dispositions in our minds, that are the strongest motives and encouragements to the practice of natural religion; and by perpetuating the defign of the revelation, to make us careful how we abuse and pervert it; 'tis plain there is nothing which even the adversaries of revelation can pretend is absolutely indifferent, but the manner in which we are to inculcate and keep alive fuch fentiments as are in themselves proper, fuited to our circumstances, and of moral use. And therefore if it can be shewn, that there are no objections of any confequence against God's interposing, and fixing this; nay, if upon some accounts it is expedient that he should do it; this will amount to an entire vindication of positive duties.

THE appointing particular rites is not for the fake of the rites themselves, but to engage men in proper and useful reflections, and give them a strong sense of their obligations; which is a rational means of religion. These reflections therefore, and this sense of their obligations, as a means of religion in their circumstances, reason might direct to; and if they were frequently inculcated, and had their due influence upon the mind, the defign of instituted rites would, in a great measure, be answer'd. But if this be sufficient, why is any particular method fix'd? Because men are apt to be negligent of what is left in a general, undetermin'd way; whereas by their being oblig'd to certain observances, the defign of which, they know, is, to engage them

them in such meditations, and fix in them fuch principles of moral conduct, and which they perform directly with this view, the end is more effectually ascertain'd and secur'd. I might rest the matter entirely upon this foot. For if in particular circumstances such meditations are proper; if the firm belief and lively influence of fuch principles is fit to be cultivated, and improv'd; if these things are of great importance to strengthen moral dispositions, and support the universal and conflant practice of the duties of natural religion; the most probable way of producing this good effect is certainly a confideration worthy the infinite wisdom of God. And if, considering the indolence, carelefness, innumerable avocations, distracting cares, sensual pursuits, and the general conduct of mankind, it appears that things of consequence are likely to be omitted, or very much neglected, if they are not fix'd and determin'd by a particular rule; the appointing such a rule clearly demonstrates to us not only the wisdom, but the goodness of the supreme Being; since it is the most effectual means to secure the virtue and happiness of his creatures.

But to this we may add farther, that the doing a thing in a way which God has preferib'd, and in obedience to his command, has a natural tendency, with all who have a becoming reverence of his infinite perfections, and confider him as the inspector and judge of their

their conduct, to beget greater seriousness and attention of mind, and confequently to make a deeper impression, than transient cursory thoughts, enter'd on at pleasure; and not under the awe of such an express obligation. So that there is very good reason why God should interpose his authority, and order that to be done in a particular manner, which, in the general confideration of it, is useful; be it either to keep up the memory of certain facts; or to impress upon the minds of men fuch principles as are evidently of moral use, to beget and confirm good dispositions, or guard against corruptions of the true religion; and if there be a good reason for a particular method, it must hold equally strong for any particular method which is fignificant, and natural, and appears wifely adapted to answer the general end.

Shout b it be faid, if this be wife and rational, reason will direct to it; why then is it not left to every man's discretion to fix upon those rites which he likes best; which are most suitable to his temper and genius; and which, he knows by experience, are most likely to affect him? Why must the same rules be prescribed to ALL, when their capacities, humours, and passions are so various? And why are they not at liberty to alter them, as circumstances alter, for others which they think will be more effectual? I answer, that this is liable to the same inconveniences as the not having these things fix'd at all, because it being still left at large, the general defign of fuch

fuch institutions cannot be so effectually secur'd, as if it was determin'd by the supreme lawgiver; -- that if there be any reason for appointments of this nature, a being of perfeet wisdom is more proper to take the care of them, than ignorant, mistaken, and fanciful men; — that the confideration of his immediate command must give a greater folemnity and weight to them, than they can have, if they are confider'd as the refult of mere buman prudence; -- and above all, that if this matter be not determin'd by some supreme authority, to which all will think themselves oblig'd to fubmit, endless differences and confusions must, not accidentally, but in the natural consequence of things, ensue; and every man's private opinion, prejudice, and humour, being his only rule, rites will be multiply'd infinitely, and a boundless superstition introduc'd.

I READILY grant the author of Christianity &c. that the instituted means prescrib'd by revelation are not of such fix'd and immutable obligation, "but that, agreeably to the law of nature," they are to be practis'd, or omitted, "as best suits that end for which they were ordain'd. To imagine the contrary (as he judiciously observes) is to make things, dependent on circumstances, indemendent; things that are proper only under fome circumstances, necessary under all circumstances; nay, to make ends mutatic ble, and means immutable; and that these

" are to continue in force, though by change of circumstances they become prejudicial;

" nay, destructive to the end for which alone

" they were ordain'd *."

WHEN external rites can't be observ'd without great inconvenience in particular countries, they may undoubtedly be dropt; in like manner, when the observation of a positive precept would be injurious to health, inconfiftent with our doing necessary acts of beneficence, which are of prior obligation, and the like. But how does this affect the prefent argument, which does not suppose that instituted means are fix'd, but with such necessary exceptions? Does it prove in general, that God cannot appoint the manner in which things that are useful shall be done? Or that fuch institutions may not be of standing, and perpetual authority in all cases wherein they do not destroy, or interfere with, their end? May they not be of that nature, as, taking the general state of the world, may be proper (so far as obedience to positive laws, which are subservient to morality, and the good of mankind, can ever be requir'd) in all ages, and nations? And may not the observation of them, even with these limitations, be of great advantage, and consequently wisely enjoin'd by the supreme Law-giver? May not things be requir'd, that are (I mean in the nature of the things themselves, for that is the

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 104, 105.

only question at present) of undoubted use upon the whole; though they may not always suit the circumstances of each individual, or the state of all countries equally, in every age of the world?

THERE is nothing that can with any shew of reason be objected against the fixing positive laws, in the manner in which their obligation has been explain'd, even " in a re-" ligion defign'd to extend over the whole " world, and last to the end of it +," but their being impracticable, or not to be observ'd without great inconvenience in general; and not at certain seasons, and in particular conjunctures only, which can't possibly be avoided. And I shall shew, when I come to treat particularly of these, from what was most probably the true intention of the legislator, that this is not the case with respect to any of the positive institutions of Christianity; and that the observation of them, by perpetuating the memory of certain facts, guarding against the worst corruptions of true religion, and begetting fuch fentiments and dispositions, as are of evident moral tendency, must be very useful every where, and in all times. fufficient at present to observe, that there may be instituted means, which, with respect to the nature of the actions themselves, may generally be practis'd without inconvenience; and if practis'd only in subordination to moral

⁺ Christianity &c. p. 107.

Christian revelation defended. 277 duties, the end they are design'd to promote, be always of use: otherwise, all actions must, in themselves, be attended with more evil than good upon the whole; and it must be denied, either that the same sentiments can be always proper to strengthen moral disposi-

tions; or, that advancing the great ends even of natural religion will be of advantage in all ages, and countries.

Bur does not what has been faid destroy " the use of all occasional commands, fince " it supposes they can't oblige people longer " than they judge it fit to observe them *?" Not at all, if they never judge it unfit to obferve them, but when it is really unfit; which, I have shewn, may not be the case upon the whole, but only in some particular circumstances that feldom happen, and must be excepted by the wifest and most useful constitutions of civil government. Let this author prove, that positive commands are necessarily, and in the nature of the things themselves, unfit to be observed in general, and he does fomething; or let him prove, that because they may happen to be abused through " the " ignorant prejudices of the weak, and fu-" perstitious, and the designs of ambitious " men +," they ought to be entirely laid afide; and not practis'd by those who understand them rightly, and to whom they are an useful means of religion, in a proper sub-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 113. + Ibid. p. 109.

ferviency to their end. But let him take this thought along with him, that if things which are calculated to be always useful are to be esteem'd burtful, and discarded, merely because they are perverted, the best and most excellent will be condemn'd with the worst; and we shall not be able to stop at giving up instituted religion, but must renounce the use of reason itself.

THUS have I largely vindicated positive precepts against the main argument which our author hath urg'd against them, that argument in which he feems most to triumph, viz. the absolute perfection of natural religion, and have endeavoured to explain the general nature and defign of them; and shewn, that when he argues against their being of such strict indispensable obligation, as to bind at all times, and in all circumstances, he argues not against the things themselves, but only against the mistakes of enthusiasts, or the corruptions of designing men. It will be very easy, upon this state of the case, to answer all his other objections, which I shall therefore more sd-or magashyem yada briefly confider.

his reasonings against mere arbitrary commands are nothing at all to the purpose, because 'tis evident from what has been said, that these are not unnecessary and arbitrary institutions. The ultimate design of them is to inculcate sentiments, or to be a memorial

of facts (as I shall prove hereafter, with respect to the positive injunctions of Christianity) which, though they suppose a revelation given, are, in fuch a circumstance, very proper to beget moral habits, to excite to a more diligent practice of the duties of natural religion, and prevent mens relapfing into their former gross corruptions of it; and consequently is wife and rational, and conducive to the perfection and happiness of mankind. There appears in general to be very good reafon, why God may appoint a particular manner of doing things, that are in themselves useful; both as it is the most probable method to secure the good effect of them, and that they may be more regarded, and make the stronger impression; and if so, there must be a foundation in reason for ordaining any particular manner which is proper to answer the end. So that there is nothing in all this that is, strictly fpeaking, arbitrary, or unworthy the care of a wife governour. The general defign good, and ferviceable to virtue; the fixing a particular method best suited to promote this defign; and ALL to be confider'd in entire subordination and subserviency to the eternal and unchangeable laws of morality. Neither the substance of such instituted duties, nor the appointing a certain manner in which they are to be perform'd, are absolutely indifferent, but there is a reason and use in both.

IF any shall be so trisling as to object, that if two rites are equally adapted to serve the T 4

fame design, the choice of either of them must be arbitrary. I answer, that the general reason for appointing some particular rite is a sufficient reason for taking either of them; but as there is no real difference between the two, one is not, and cannot be, prefer'd before the other as fitter in itself, which would indeed be acting without a reason,

THIS I take to be a full answer to all our author's long and frequent declamations against arbitrary, and tyrannical precepts, which, though they may deferve to be confider'd by the rigid imposers of buman ceremonies, that only incumber religion, instead of having any useful influence towards advancing true and substantial goodness; do not at all affect positive duties of divine appointment, for enjoining which there is always a reason to be affign'd, besides themere will of the law-giver. And he himself has allow'd, that if there be "any reason to deprive men of their liberty " in indifferent things" [and the case is exactly the same, if there be any reason for making actions, that are in themselves indifferent, facred rites of religion] " they then cease " to be indifferent *."

I SHALL add however under this head (though it is not necessary to vindicate positive precepts as above explain'd, in which there is not the least mark of arbitrariness, and tyranny) that let a thing appear to be, in itself;

T Christianity &c. p. 135.

of no particular moral use; let it be allow'd, that we can affign no special reason for its being enjoin'd; but that, abstracted from the consideration of a divine command, it feems altogether indifferent, and to have nothing, either in its nature, or peculiar tendency, to recommend it above other things, in which men are left at their full liberty; I think it will be very hard, if not impossible, even upon this state of the case, to prove, that there cannot be any general reason for appointing the observation of it, and that one such minute variation " in instituted religion from the " religion of nature, and reason, makes all " things else that can be said for its support " totally ineffectual *."

FOR let us suppose a pretended revelation, the defign of which, upon being carefully examin'd, is approv'd of as most wife, rational, and useful, and which is, in all other respects, as perfect as we can conceive any thing of that kind to be. Let this most excellent scheme of doctrine be not only adapted, in general, to promote the highest moral perfection, and happiness of human nature; but fuited exactly to the circumstances and necessities of a corrupt and degenerate world; to enlighten their reason in those points, about which it was most perverted and darkned, and reform their most flagrant and burtful errors. If, together with these internal characters, it has the attestation of numerous and undeniable miracles; shall one or two positive

^{*} Christianity &c. Page 60.

institutions (I appeal to the cool, and impartial reason of mankind) shall, I say, one or two positive institutions, for which we cannot discern that there is any particular reason, set aside all this evidence, which otherwise would be admitted as most clear and unexceptionable?

No miracles indeed will prove irrational and immoral doctrines to be from God, because we are infallibly certain, from our knowledge of his moral perfections, that he cannot reveal any such doctrines; but we are far from being sure, that he can in no case whatever enjoin the practice of indifferent things, for which there does not appear, from the peculiar nature or tendency of the things themselves, to be any special reason; all therefore that we can have to confider is, on which fide the greatest probability lies. And this may soon be determin'd; because we can give no account, how the pretenfions of a doctrine claiming to be a divine revelation should be thus supported, by having such internal marks, as plainly demonstrate it could not proceed from evil spirits, and by the teftimony of miracles, which prove beyond doubt the interposition of some superior invisible agent, if it be not really divine; whereas on the other hand, there may be general reasons for enjoining certain things, which appear to have no particular reason founded on the things themselves, or use at all. Whoever denies this must deny likewise that

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God can have a wife design in any of the methods of his providence towards mankind, which they do not perceive; and upon such a groundless presumption, which is contradicted by universal experience, resuse to be determined by what, himself would otherwise allow, to be the clearest, and fullest proof possible of a divine interposition.

But besides, the using ourselves to reflections of this kind, which such a command will naturally excite in us, viz. " that God is to be obey'd in all the fignifications of " his will, because as he is absolutely wife, and good, he can enjoin nothing without a " reason," will perhaps suggest in part what the reason of such institutions may be, viz. to cultivate this principle, and keep up a constant sense of it in the mind. And for the great importance and usefulness of this I shall only fay, that as it tends to babituate to us the highest reverence of God, and most entire submission to his authority; so the want of it has been the true cause, that so many little pretenders to reason and philosophy have, in all ages, taken upon them to censure several things, both in the constitution of nature, and course of providence, merely because they have not understood them; and urg'd their own ignorance arising from the narrowness of their faculties, or perhaps from a superficial knowledge, and confus'd way of thinking, their own mistakes, and inadequate conceptions, as real faults in the frame of the universe:

universe; and consequently as objections against the absolute wisdom and goodness of the creator, and governour of all things.

AND consider'd in this view, why may not such commands be given to creatures in a state of trial, agreeably to the general end of their being plac'd in such a state, which is not for the information of the Divine mind, but to exercise, in a proper manner, their moral dispositions and habits, and by that means frengthen and improve their virtue? Let it be granted, that " moral and immoral things " are the most proper subjects for this *;" tis enough that these other may not be improper. And whereas the author of Christianity &c. asks farther, " if earthly kings, who may " be deceiv'd, and for the most part are so, "would be justly esteem'd tyrants, if they require things of their subjects merely to " try their obedience; how can we think " this of the omniscient, infinitely glorious "king of kings+?" 'Tis sufficient to answer, that there is no arguing from earthly governments to God's government of the world; and what would be tyrannical in the one, may be very wife and fit in the other; because the power of earthly kings is to be exercis'd no farther, than the end of their civil authority requires, which end, the order, peace, and happine/s of fociety, cannot be any way advanc'd by such arbitrary injunctions; whereas the

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 176. † Ibid.

chief design of God's government being to promote inward rectitude, and establish right principles and dispositions in the mind, whatever has a tendency to beget or confirm such dispositions may be appointed by him, without incurring the imputation of arbitrariness and tyranny.

THE ingenious author tells us farther that " there is no way to avoid this objection, of God's willing contrarieties; but by suppos-" ing he requires nothing of men, but what " is founded on the nature of things, and " the immutable relations they bear to one " another; and what, confequently, they are, " as far as concerns them, capable of know-" ing. But this objection is unanswerable by " those, who believe the will of God is not " always thus founded; but may contain " many merely positive things; fince men " may, after having taken all possible care " to be in the right, have very opposite sen-" timents; and be oblig'd, by the will of " God, to hold, and act contrarieties *."

Is he means by things merely positive such as are absolutely useles, or which are commanded only for commanding-sake; these are not the things I am bound to defend, because it will hereaster be shewn that Christianity enjoins nothing of this kind. And I would fain know, what contrariety there is between duties, that

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 6.

differ no otherwise than as means and end? Is there any inconfiftency between positive duties and moral, when the positive are enjoin'd in perfect subordination to, and have a tendency to support the practice of moral duties. Do they destroy, or in the least clash with each other? The case is only this. that some duties are requir'd of such as enjoy a revelation, which are not requir'd of those who want it; i.e. in other words, their duties differ, according as their circumflances differ; and this is as true upon the foot of natural religion only, as upon the fupposition of a revelation; and that, not only with respect to the means of religion, but the substance of it. What, for instance, can be more different, than the duties of prosperity, and adversity; the duties which spring from the mutual relations of parents and children, masters and servants, and the like? If it be faid, that these are universal duties, because they oblige all mankind in fuch circumstances; this may likewise be affirm'd of positive duties, that they would oblige all, if all were in the same circumstances, and had the same knowledge of the revelation. And any farther than they have the means of knowing them, they are not concern'd to know them; their ignorance will not in the least hinder their acceptance with their maker. The fum of the whole is, that upon supposing a revelation communicated to some parts of the world, and not to the rest, (which has been already vindicated) mens particular religious obligations must

must of necessity be different, tho not inconfistent; and the one have certain duties, which the other cannot discover: In this case indeed, men may, "after having taken all possible "care to be in the right, have very opposite "fentiments, and be oblig'd, by the will of "God, to hold, and act contrarieties," or rather, the one to do some things which the other is not bound to do; and yet neither be wrong, because they may both do all, that can justly be expected from them.

I HAVE confider'd the matter in this view, that I might not drop any part of our author's sense. But, I own, I am not certain whether he means, that positive and moral duties are contrarieties; or that " men are " oblig'd, by the will of God, to hold, and " act contrarieties," because some are bound to certain duties by revelation, which others, with all their care and diligence, can't discover, nor consequently be under an obligation to practife; or elfe, that those who have equally the use of the revelation may, after an impartial fearch, differ about the nature of positive institutions, and being oblig'd each, by the will of God, to follow the direction of his own judgment and conscience, which, in this case, prescribe contrary rules, must be bound by the fame " will, to hold and act " contrarieties." The two former fenses have been fufficiently confider'd, and to the latter 'tis easy to reply, that if there be any thing in it, it must prove, that God can give no laws

laws to mankind of any fort, but what all, who are bonest and impartial, must necessarily understand in the same precise sense; but this is not, and 'tis great folly to expect it ever will be the case, with respect to particular branches even of moral duty. Honest men have always differ'd (and there is no ground to imagine, that such differences will cease in any age hereafter) in explaining both the laws of revelation, and reason. And it will be an excellent consequence indeed of our author's reasoning, if, upon this account, we must throw up both positive and moral duties, i. e. in short, all religion, reveal'd and natural, at once.

AND whereas it is asked, " how it can " be conceived, that God's laws, whether " internally, or externally reveal'd, are not " at all times the same, when the author of " them is, and has been immutably the fame " for ever *?" I answer, that this, if rightly understood, infers the direct contrary to what it was intended to prove. For the unchangeableness of God only supposes in general, that he will always necessarily do what is wifest and best. If therefore some things are proper upon supposing a revelation, for which there could be no foundation at all, if men were left to the mere light of reason; and if it be upon feveral accounts expedient, that the manner of doing such things should be expresly

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 103.

fix'd and determin'd, which, I apprehend, has been fully prov'd; even the immutable wisdom and goodness of God must oblige him, in these different circumstances, to make mens particular duties and religious obligations different; and command certain things by revelation, which can't be universal laws because not discoverable by all, nor consequently belong to the original religion of nature.

THE only charge, which remains against positive duties, is the charge of superstition. Now in order to set this matter in a clear light, and shew that there is no just foundation for such a charge, I would observe the following things.

the ingenious author seems to think a great absurdity may be true, viz. that "what is "superstition by the light of nature, may be a part of religion by revelation *." I don't mean, that what the reason of mankind must necessarily, at all times, and in all circumslances, condemn as superstitious, can ever cease to be so; for this would be to affert, that the natures of things are not what they are, and consequently to maintain contradictions; but that what might justly be esteem'd superstition, if men were left to the direction of the light of nature only, will lose that character if God

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 136.

290 The usefulness and truth of the interposes, and by an express revelation enjoins the practice of it.

For instance, our author, I make no doubt, will readily allow, that if a thing may "as well be done this as that way *," the fixing and establishing, by human authority, certain particular rites as necessary, and of universal obligation, and supposing that men are not at liberty to make use of any other, or of none at all, is rank superstition and enthusiasm. But this I shall endeavour to shew is not, and cannot be, the case upon the supposition of a revelation given, and that the matter is determin'd by a divine law.

IT has been already largely prov'd, that the defign of politive institutions is to improve moral dispositions, and consequently rational and good; that there may be a wife reason for appointing a particular method, in which things, that are useful in themselves, shall be done; and confequently, for appointing any particular method that is calculated to answer the general end; and that if there are two methods equally proper, the general reason for fixing any method at all is a sufficient reason for taking either of them. So that the manner of doing a thing, tho in itself absolutely indifferent, may be made a part of mens religious obligations by the great governour of the world, confistently with his most

perfect wisdom and goodness; which, if they themselves took upon them to fix it as a law binding conscience, would be weak and superstitious. If therefore we are convinc'd, that a command of this fort, which has been shewn to be worthy of God, is actually given by him; the yielding obedience to it is fo far from being superstition, that it is a branch even of our moral duty. Our obligation to fubmit to it results from one of the first principles of natural religion, viz. that God can command nothing but what is just and rational, and confequently has a right to be univerfally obey'd; and to fay that we are not bound to practife every thing, which we have clear evidence be requires of us by revelation, as well as by the law of reason, is indeed to make all religion superstition.

For why is it, that we consider moral duties themselves as parts of natural religion? Is it merely because they are in themselves sit, and have their foundation in the immutable nature and relations of things, without having any regard to the authority of that Supreme being, who has plainly declar'd it to be his will that we should observe them, by framing that constitution, and appointing those relations, from which they necessarily arise? Undoubtedly, 'tis not. For however amiable, upon this supposition, the practice of those duties might be, however becoming rational beings, and necessary to promote the happiness of mankind; it could not with any propriety

be call'd religion, if we excluded the consideration of God as our governour and judge; and did not regard them as laws which be hath given us. And, on the contrary, if we do consider him as our wife and righteous governour, this will necessarily lead us to practise every thing that we are persuaded is his will, whether moral, or positive; otherwise, we renounce the dependence of creatures on their creator; or suppose, that he is an unjust tyrannical governour who is not sit to be obey'd; and consequently overturn not only all external revelation, but the religion of nature and reason itself.

I HAVE all along suppos'd, that God may be the author of positive institutions, which, I think, has been fully prov'd, and that men are convinc'd, that particular institutions of this kind are divine; and allowing this, if the observation of them be superstition, the confequence will necessarily be the subversion of all religion. But if, on the contrary, this principle be true, without which even natural religion cannot subsist, viz. that the authority of God, plainly perceiv'd, ought, in all cases, to determine our behaviour; wilful disobedience to a positive precept, though in itself mutable, must be an immorality, and confequently a violation of the law of reason, which is eternal and immutable. Though the command itself be positive, the argument for obedience is moral.

INDEED

INDEED if men rest in outward rites even of God's appointment, and are only concern'd about performing the ceremonial part, but are not led by them, according to the design of their institution, to cultivate and impress upon their minds those useful sentiments, which have a tendency to beget and improve moral dispositions, and are alone the means of religion, the particular manner being only appointed as the most likely way to ascertain their good effect; if they think, that God is pleas'd with mere external forms, which, in themselves, are but trifles, and imagine, that they shall " propitiate an all-wise and gracious " being by fuch things as have no worth or " excellency in them *," nay, if they fanfy that there is an efficacy, to procure the divine favour, in the best part of instituted means, inculcating proper reflections, and a becoming sense of their obligations, whether the great end of all, producing and strengthning moral dispositions, be promoted, or not; their religion is as truly superstition, as if it was entirely the offspring of their own will and fancy. But if there be a reason, why things, which are in themselves useful, should be appointed to be done in a particular manner; if this manner be thought of importance above others that, in the nature of things, might be equally proper, only because God, for wife ends, has directed to it; if the whole of infti-

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^{*} Christianity &c. p. 136.

tuted means be confider'd as in a necessary subferviency to the eternal laws of morality, and look'd upon as infignificant and trifling, if they do not excite to the practice of that religion, which is fubstantially and unchangeably good; if it be thought impious to separate the means from the end, and much more to make them destructive of it, or hope to compound, by the most scrupulous exactness about external and instrumental observances, for the neglect of indispensable moral duties; here is not the least appearance of superstition: No " unwor-"thy notions entertain'd of God; no con-" ceiving of him as an arbitrary, light, or paf-" fionate "" being, pleas'd, and offended with trifles; but as a wife and gracious governour, who takes the most effectual methods to make the means of religion useful, and consequently to advance the virtue and bappiness of his subjects; and has establish'd the due subordination of means to ends, and requires and accepts instituted religion only in its proper place, i. e. so far as it promotes a more strict regard to natural, and the practice of rational and real goodness. But,

2. As the observation of positive duties, in the manner in which they have been describ'd, and the design and reason of them argued, is not, and cannot, in itself, be superstition; I shall endeavour to shew farther, that it has no tendency to superstition. That positive in-

stitutions have been used superstitiously, and men have laid an equal stress upon them as upon morality itself, can't be denied; nay, that they have refolv'd the whole of religion into external observances, and instead of making it consist in the necessary duties of piety, justice, and charity, placed it not only in the means instituted by God, but in trifling ceremonies, ufeles speculations, and incomprehensible mysteries of man's inventing, and imposing; and that their zeal for these things, animated by blind superstition and prejudice, and under the influence of interested and defigning men, has transported them beyond all bounds, even to despise and trample upon the facred and eternal rules of natural religion, we have many fad examples to prove. And let this wild enthusiasm be expos'd to the utmost; let the craft and knavery of politicians, or priefts, who have debauch'd the consciences of men, and their natural sense of good and evil, be represented in the most odious colours. But though wife and honest men of all parties, who are concern'd for the purity of religion, heartily wish all possible success to fuch a defign; the fact itself, I apprehend, is nothing at all to the point in question: because the most excellent and useful things in the world, thro' the folly and perverseness of mankind, and the prevalency of irregular passions; thro' the weakness of some, and the fubtilty and vile management of others; may be the occasions of the groffest corruptions. Thus religion itself has been made use of to lanctify

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fanctify cruelty, perfidiousness, treasons, murders, and the blackest enormities; and the general notion of worshipping God has, accidentally, introduc'd superstition and idolatry. Persons therefore, who think impartially, won't be inclin'd to argue from events, or the abuses of things; but from their direct and natural tendency. And this is the true state of the question with respect to positive duties, whether in themselves, and in their direct consequences, they lead to superstition; or whether this be not an accidental abuse of them (to which the best things are liable) quite contrary to their natural influence, which is to support true and rational religion. If the author of Christianity &c. could prove the former of these, it would be very much to his purpose; but what he has faid directly to this argument is but little, and, I think, of no great weight. Let us proceed however to examine it.

"Tis urg'd then, that " the supposing things " indifferent equally commanded with mat" ters of morality, tends to make men be" lieve they are alike necessary *". If he means by equally commanded, enjoin'd as of equal importance, this is undoubtedly true; but every one, that knows any thing of the doctrine of scripture, must know that this is far from being the case; positive duties being always represented as inferior and sub-

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 149.

fervient to moral, and of no fignificancy or value in comparison with justice, mercy, fidelity, and other branches of the law of nature, which are of supreme, eternal, and indispensable obligation. Let the argument therefore be justly stated, and as I would suppose this author himself intended it, and 'twill run thus; that " the supposing things indifferent " to be commanded as well as matters of mo-" rality, tho they are declar'd to be of far less " importance, and of no worth at all, if they " don't promote a stricter regard to morality, " tends to make men believe they are alike " necessary, and lay an equal stress upon both." Which is, as if a man should say, that my telling another light and darkness are two very different things, has a tendency to make him think they are the fame. One would rather be apt to conclude, that the enjoining one thing in subordination to another, and constantly inculcating that subordination, must have a necessary tendency, which, 'tis very strange, should ever fail of its effect, to make all, but ideots and mad people, believe, that they are of vastly different importance. And if it be likely that the bulk of mankind will always be fo indolent and thoughtless, as to disregard such plain directions, the plainest indeed that can be given them, there is no possible guard against their falling into fuperstition; but, let what caution will be us'd, as long as there are means and ends, which must be allow'd upon the foot of natural religion, as well as of revelation, they " will put a greater stress on

means, tho of fome use in religion, than their nature will bear; to the confound-

" ing things of the greatest moment with

" those of the smallest ".".

AGAIN: 'Tis faid farther, that because " fensible things make a deeper impression " on the minds of the common people than " words; that is a just reason against their " use in religion +." The deeper impresfion itself can certainly be no reason against, but rather for them; because it must undeniably be of great use, if it be corrected and bounded by reason, and does not produce superstition and enthunasm. But this will be the effect, " because the vulgar, who gene-" rally look no farther than externals, do not use them barely, as they do words, " to express their meaning; but conceive " in them I know not what internal holi-" ness; and think such symbolical represen-" tations as necessary as the things represent-"ed by them; nay, by degrees, forgetting " the reason of their institution, come to " idolize them, as the Israelites did the bra-" zen ferpent !." This is still arguing only from facts, and not from the natural tendency of things; whereas the true question is, whether the revelation has not laid down very plain rules to prevent fuch misapprehensions, by declaring, that instituted rites have no

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 150. † Pag. 172, 173. 1 Christianity &c. p. 173.

fanctity in them, and are no better than any the most useless and trifling ceremonies, if they don't promote moral goodness; and confequently, whether the common people, if they would use their reason, might not easily avoid fuch groundless and superstitious conceits? If it be faid, that we may argue however with probability, that those abuses will always happen, because they ever have happen'd " in all religions whatever, where fym-" bolical representations have been used *:" I answer, that as the design of revelation is to teach men otherwise; as it is a very plain and fufficient rule for this purpose, which if they give the least attention to, they will be better inform'd; God is not answerable for consequences. If superstition be so much the foible of mankind, as indeed the experience of every age testifies, all that can be expected from the wife governour of the world is, that if he communicates a revelation, proper care will be taken to prevent it. Now this is, in reason, as effectually done by declaring, that all external rites are in themselves of no account, and have no virtue but what they derive from a subserviency to their end; as if none but moral things were made a part of religion. There is no more foundation for it, really, in the one case, than in the other; and by the same means that it prevails now, it would also prevail if any other rule was given, the plainest and simplest that can be

thought of. For as the matter stands at prefent, if men would think, they must certainly avoid all such hurtful errors; and if they will not, besides that their religion is good for nothing, how can they be secur'd, upon any possible supposition, from the grossest extravagancies?

Our author has one passage more upon this head, which indeed is very extraordinary. " As long (he fays) as men believe " the good of fociety is the supreme law, " they will think it their duty to be go-" vern'd by that law; and believing God " requires nothing of them but what is for " the good of mankind, will place the whole " of their religion in benevolent actions, and " to the utmost of their abilities copy after " the divine original; but if they are made " to believe there are things, which have no " relation to this good, necessary to falva-" tion; they must suppose it their duty, to " use such means as will most effectually " ferve this purpose. - 'Tis to this prin-" ciple we owe the most cruel persecutions, " inquisitions, crusades, and massacres; tu-" mults, seditions, rebellions, &c *." i. e. " If " men are made to believe there are things, " which have no relation to the good of " fociety [or which do no good, or harm] " necessary to falvation; they must suppose " it their duty to use such means as will

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 151, 152.

Christian revelation defended. 301 " most effectually serve this purpose [of do-"ing neither good nor hurt; and upon " this principle of doing no mischief, do all " the mischief they can, and persecute and " destroy their fellow-creatures." Does it follow, that because God commands some things, which, if in themselves they bave no relation to the good of fociety, are not burtful; the people must naturally be led to think, that 'tis not only an innocent thing (which itself is going a prodigious length) but their duty to commit the vilest injustice and cruelty? If they can draw fuch inferences as these, they are not capable of being instructed, nor fit to be reason'd with. I might add, that none of the positive institutions of Christianity are of the kind this author speaks of, but have all a tendency to promote morality (and one of them, in particular, the most universal, difinterested, and generous benevolence) and consequently the greatest good of

But my design in citing this passage was not to argue against it, the desect in the reasoning being too gross to escape any reader's notice, who thinks at all of what he reads; let it therefore serve only as a specimen (I chuse to censure in the most modest and favourable manner) how apt even ingenious disputants are, in the heat of controversy, to overshoot themselves; and impose upon their own better understandings so far, as to join ideas together that have in nature no connection,

mankind.

nection, or dependance; and put things into the conclusion, for which there is not the least foundation in the premises. A method of arguing, by the way, whereby any thing may be concluded from any thing; nay, even contraries made to infer each other. Having shewn thus largely that instituted religion is not, in itself, superstition; and if rightly understood, (and the revelation is so plain, that 'tis very unaccountable that any should take it wrong) has no more a tendency to superstition, than natural religion itself; I shall conclude this chapter with observing,

3. THAT Christianity, as it requires only two or three plain and useful positive duties; and strictly obliges its professors not to add to them. by declaring against all impositions*, and afferting more particularly, that the religion enjoin'd in the gospel is pure and spiritual +, not to be incumber'd and corrupted by human forms and ceremonies, nay, that we worship God in vain, if we teach for doctrines the commandments of ment; Christianity, I fay, feems, by these things, to have guarded more effectually against enthusiasm and superstition, than if it had explicitly requir'd only moral duties, and left it to every man's fancy to invent the means of religion for himself. For, by this excellent constitution, all the means of religion, being of God's appoint-

^{*} Rom. xiv. 2,3, 4, 5. Gal. v. 1, 13. † John iv. 23, 24. ‡ Mat. xv. 9.

ing, will be wife and rational; and if men understand, and resolve to follow the directions of the revelation, nothing that is weak and enthusiastical can be introduc'd. But if every one be allow'd to act according to his private opinion, and humour; or as he is influenc'd by his fears, and foolish notions of the Deity; he may (and there are many circumstances supposeable, in which 'tis probable he will) run the utmost lengths of an unbounded and endless superstition.

CHAP:

CHAP. V.

A particular vindication of the peculiar positive institutions of Christianity.

IS one great excellency of the Christian revelation, that its-positive institutions are very few, as well as admirably calculated to promote and encourage the practice of virtue; fo that our religion is not incumber'd with ceremonies, nor are our minds diverted from more important and useful duties; the main substance of Christianity being the law of nature explain'd upon the noblest principles, and inforc'd by the strongest motives. But it will naturally be ask'd, if the fewer the better, would it not be best of all if there were none? That does not follow, because two or three may be very belpful, (especially if we consider, that a revelation, defign'd to be of universal advantage, must be calculated chiefly for the vulgar; and if it was fuited to the taste of the few, in every age, who think and reason more closely and abstractedly, it would, with respect to the bulk of mankind, be useless) two or three pofitive precepts, I fay, may be very belpful, when a great number would be burthenfom, and perhaps too much engage the attention. However, if this inference will not hold,

hold, does not the observation which has been made reflect on the Mojaic institution, in the same proportion as it does honour to the Christian? If it be a circumstance very much in favour of the latter, must it not be a great prejudice against the former, which was a law abounding in ceremonies, and ritual observances? I answer, that it undoubtedly proves the superior excellency of the Christian religion; but, I apprehend; will not conclude what the adversaries of revelation would infer from it, viz. that the law of Moses was not of divine original. For though when God gives a revelation that is defign'd for general use, and consequently considers men only as reasonable creatures, and is not adaptto the gemus, complexion, or state of any particular nation, 'tis natural to expect that it will be plain and simple, and not overloaded with things of an external and positive nature; yet there are circumstances supposeable, in which even a ceremonious religion may answer very valuable purposes. And this I take to have been the case with respect to the Tewish rites.

God, who was not oblig'd to give an external revelation at all, nor consequently to make it universal, thought sit, in his infinite wisdom (after having reveal'd himself, at sundry times, to particular persons) to chuse the posterity of Abraham, as a reward of his signal piety and extraordinary virtue, in order to preserve amongst them the acknow-

knowledgment and worship of himself as the one true God, and the principles of natural religion (which were almost lost, in other nations, by the univerfal increase of idolatry and superstition) pure and uncorrupt, till the time came, which he had fix'd for a more general reformation; and order'd it so in the course of his providence, that by their captivities, dispersions, and the translation of the books of their religion into Greek, &c. the revelation he had afforded them might be of some use to the Gentile world; both by scattering here and there good principles and notions of natural religion; and raifing, throughout the East, about the time of our Saviour's coming, a pretty common expectation of an extraordinary person, to appear in Judea. The end therefore, which God had in view, not being attainable, without preferving them a distinct people, in their religion, customs, and manners, from other nations, the law of ceremonies was instituted with this view; and if it was the most likely method to answer the great purpose for which it was intended, that will be a sufficient vindication of the wisdom of it.

And, I think, there will be no great difficulty in proving this, if we confider how the fews were circumstanc'd. A people who had been strongly prejudic'd in favour of idolatrous and superstitious customs by living in Egypt, in those early ages of the world the most famous feat and nursery of superstition; who affected

affected a religion of pomp and ceremony; were incompassed on all sides by idolaters; and appear to have been inclin'd, upon all occasions, to fall in with the idolatry of the neighbouring nations: a people, I fay, fo fituated and disposed, would probably have kept no order, if their national weakness and prejudices had not been in some measure indulg'd: And the best security against their joining in the idolatrous rites that prevail'd all around 'em, and renouncing the worship of the true God, was to divert them, by giving them innocent ceremonies of their own; which, besides, as they were practis'd in honour of him, kept up a constant sense of his authority, and, upon that account, must have a natural tendency to fettle and establish their minds. In like manner, those rites which were design'd to hinder their free commerce with other nations, and imitating the customs and usages among them especially, which had any relation to their superstition, must have been wisely adapted to the state and circumstance of things; because an imitation of the manners of the Gentiles, and contracting an intimacy and familiarity with them, would have led naturally, and almost infensibly, to the practice of their idolatries: and 'tis evident that rites and ordinances of this kind are a great part of the Mojaic institution.

I MIGHT add, that several things which are reckon'd to belong to the religion of the Jews, were only branches of their civil con-

flitution; and farther, that as we are able to affign a good reason in general, from their temper, prejudices, fituation, and the wife views of providence in preserving them a separate people, why they should be indulged in a ceremonious worship, as being the furest way to keep them at the greatest distance from the manners and customs of their idolatrous neighbours; fo, 'tis not at all unlikely, that if we were thoroughly acquainted with the circumstances of those times, we might see a particular reason for chusing the ceremonies that were appointed above others; and nothing frange, if in a period, where we have scarce any light from history to direct our inquiries, we can't account distinctly for every institution.

But as this whole affair is a fort of digression from my main design, I would not enlarge upon it; and shall therefore only make one observation more, viz. that lest the people should be diverted, by the multitude of rites to which they were oblig'd, from an attention to those infinitely more important duties, in which the effence of true religion must always confist; and lay so much stress upon ceremonial institutions, as to depreciate and neglect immutable moral obligations; all possible care is taken, in the writings of the Old Testament, to guard against such Superfitious abuses. The substance of religion is expresly declar'd to lie in those things only, which are intrinfically good; and positive inflitutions.

stitutions to be mere infignificant trifles in comparison of piety, justice, and mercy; nay, to be even offensive and abominable in the fight of God, when they are put upon a level with the eternal laws of natural religion. The fentiments upon this subject are the justest, strongest, and most sublime that can be found any where, and frequently inculcated by prophets rais'd up for that very purpose; so that 'twas nothing but wiful perverseness that made the Jews so zealous for their ceremonies, to the contempt and subversion of morality; and even the weakest among them, if they had read their own scriptures with the least care, could not have fallen into such a pernicious error, which is so explicitly and directly condemn'd.

I PROCEED now to what I at first proposed, "a particular vindication of the pewordiar positive institutions of Christianity;" and in this I need be but short, because it will immediately appear, upon their being truly stated and explain'd, that they are entirely subservient to morality; the strongest obligations upon us to the practice of universal virtue; and have a direct tendency to encourage and strengthen the best and most useful dispositions of human nature; dispositions that will make men most amiable and easy in themselves, and most agreeable and beneficial to others.

By baptism we voluntarily, and in the most folemn manner, make a profession of the Christian religion: And as it is done freely, and from choice, we necessarily oblige ourfelves by this action to imitate the life of Christ, and govern our temper and behaviour by the rules he has prescrib'd, i. e. to copy after the most perfett example, and practife the most entire, generous, and useful virtue, that was ever prescrib'd by any scheme of philosophy, or institution of religion: We oblige ourselves to that rational piety, impartial juflice, universal difinterested and condescending goodness, and strict temperance, which Christianity fo clearly recommends, and powerfully inforces; expecting, upon these terms only, the favour of almighty God, and an happy immortality. And can any thing be more becoming rational beings, than to bring themselves under the strictest obligations to promote the true dignity and perfection of their nature, and the general good of their fellow creatures?

IF it be faid, that our very profession of the Christian religion obliges us to all this, without the use of any particular rite or ceremony? I answer, that doing it by a solemn rite, and in a public manner, will be an additional motive, with all who have a sense of ingenuity, to perform their voluntary engagements; that the doing it in a way appointed by God, and in obedience to his command.

mand, has a natural tendency to make them more fincere in their resolutions, give them a more lively sense of their obligations, and leave a deeper impression upon the mind: And befides, by appointing a particular rite, and making it mens duty to submit to it, every man is put, at his first setting out in religion, upon examining the evidences of it, and the different natures and consequences of virtue and vice; by which means his religion will become the matter of his deliberate and free choice. For though the bulk of mankind go on in the beaten track, and because they are never call'd upon to make a particular inquiry, take their religion implicitly, just as the chance of education and custom directs; yet one would imagine, that when they are bound, by a ceremony instituted on purpose, to make a solemn profession of it, this should always suggest to them, that now is the proper time to confider feriously upon what foundation it stands, and the reasons by which it is supported; and whatever the real fact be, I am fure it is the natural tendency of the thing: And therefore it must be calculated, in itself, to answer the most useful purposes, because nothing can be of greater importance towards making men fix'd and steady in a virtuous course, than their entring upon it after mature deliberation, and a full conviction of the judgment.

AND if there are these uses of some particular rite, it will be a sufficient justification

of any fingle one, that it is as fit as any other, and does not interfere with the main defign of the institution. This, I say, is as much as can, in strict reason, be requir'd. But, beyoud this, it may be urg'd in favour of babtism, the initiating ceremony of the Christian religion, that it is, it/elf, the most natural and fignificant that can be, and expressive of those very obligations, which we bring ourselves under by submitting to it. This is strongly represented by St. Paul in the following passage (if we understand by bapti/m the rite that was originally appointed, and algways practifed in the first Christian churches, viz. immer fion; otherwise, indeed, the beauty and force of the comparison is entirely lost) Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him, by baptism, into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life *.

I NEED not set myself to prove, that this is a rite which may generally be practised without inconvenience, and consequently is sit to be enjoin'd in a religion design'd for all ages and nations; because the constant experience of those who use it, adhering strictly to the original institution, is a most convincing demonstration of this; amongst whom, not-

Christian revelation defended. 313 withstanding some instances of a precipitate and incautious zeal, it scarce ever is, and if but common prudence was exercis'd, we have the utmost reason to believe, never would at all be, attended with ill consequences; and besides, an attempt of this kind would be trissing with the reader in an age, in which the practice of cold-bathing is so frequently recommended even to the most tender constitutions, and acknowledg'd to have such excellent effects.

Upon the whole, there is every circumstance, in this positive institution of Christianity. that can recommend it, and manifest the great wildom and goodness of God in appointing it. The general defign of it is to oblige Christians. in the most folemn manner, to a conduct that is becoming rational creatures, conducive to the rectitude of human nature, and the good of fociety, viz. to abstain from vice and impurity of all kinds, and practife the most universal, constant, and amiable virtue. - The fixing a particular rite is of great use, to engage their attention, and give them a stronger sense of their obligations, and as it binds ALL to a voluntary and deliberate engagement to lead a fober, righteous, and godly life. - As the substance of the duty, or the principal thing intended by it, must always be useful, the external ceremony itself is of that kind, as may generally be practis'd, not only without inconvenience, but with advantage, and is withal very natural and fignificant, and wife-

ly adapted to the main design. — To which we may add, that there is the utmost care taken to prevent superstitious abuses of it, not only by afferting, in general, the utter insignificancy of all instituted means without real virtue and goodness; and constantly inculcating the moral use of this particular institution; but by declaring in express terms, that 'tis not the external part of baptism, putting away the filth of the sless, for which we are consider'd as good Christians, and intitled to the reward of eternal life, but the answer of a good conscience towards God*.

ANOTHER positive institution of Christianity is what we commonly call the Lord's supper. And as, in this ordinance, the death of Christ is commemorated under the notion of a sacrifice, I shall, before I specify the moral uses of it, endeavour briefly to explain and vindicate that representation: Which is the more necessary, because nothing in the whole Christian doctrine has been more grosly misrepresented, or given its adversaries, who take their accounts of it from party writers, and not from the New Testament itself (a method of proceeding that argues great unfairness and prejudice) a more plausible occasion to triumph. But if the matter be rightly consider'd, it will appear, that the advantages, which they think they have against the Christian religion upon this head, are but imaginary. For,

* 1 Pet. iii. 21,

* I. THE New Testament no where represents God as a rigorous inexorable being, who infifted upon full satisfaction for the fins of men, before he could be induc'd to offer terms of reconciliation. It fays, indeed, not one word of Jatisfaction, much less of strict and adequate satisfaction; not a syllable of the infinite evil of fin; of infinite justice; the bypostatical union, or the deity's being so united to the man Christ Jesus, as that the two infinitely distinct natures constitute one person, and, by virtue of this union, giving an infinite value to the sufferings of the human nature, and enabling it to pay a strict equivalent to God's offended vindictive justice. All this, I fay, is the invention of more modern ages (who, by subtil distinctions, and metaphysical obscurities. have deform'd true Christianity to such a degree, that scarce any of its original features appear) and bears not the least similitude to the language of the New Testament; in which the Divine Being is always describ'd as flow to anger, merciful and condescending to the frailties and infirmities of mankind; and forgiveness of sin represented, not as a thing for which a price of equal value was paid, and which might consequently be demanded in strict justice, but as a voluntary act of pure favour, and the effect of free and undeferved goodness. Nay, farther,

^{*} For a defence of the author against misrepresentations, and a clearer and fuller account of the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice, the reader is referr'd to the Postscript.

- 2. The New Testament never afferts, that God could not have pardon'd sin without a sacrifice, nor consequently, that the death of Christ, consider'd in that view, was, upon any account, absolutely necessary. If indeed it be prov'd, that this method is of divine appointment, this will and ought to satisfy us, that there are wife reasons for it; but it can't be inferr'd from hence, that 'twas absolutely necessary, or that the same wise purposes might not have been as effectually answer'd some other way. Nor,
- 3. Does the Christian religion any where expresly declare, or so much as intimate to us, that natural reason could not discover God to be a propitious being, and ready to be reconcil'd to his guilty creatures upon their repentance; but, on the contrary, lays down this as the fundamental point of all religion, and consequently as a principle that might be argued with great probability, that God is a rewarder of them who diligently seek him *; and supposes, that the great goodness which he has demonstrated in the general constitution of things, and course of providence, was a rational encouragement to the Gentile world to serve and worship him, in hopes of acceptance and mercy.
- 4. It is of great importance to observe, that the death of Christ (as far as appears) would have happen'd, if it had never been

defign'd as a facrifice; and consequently was not appointed arbitrarily and folely with a view to that. The true state of the case feems to be this. The wife and merciful God, having compassion on the ignorance and degeneracy of the world, determin'd, at a certain time fix'd by his infinite wisdom, to interpose; and when they had corrupted the religion of nature, and were not likely to recover the right knowledge of it, teach them their duty by an external revelation. The perfon, whom he chose to be his messenger, is characteriz'd as his Son, an innocent person of great dignity and excellence, whom he had before employ'd in the most important transactions, and who was highly belov'd and favour'd by him; and the principal * reason of his employing one so extraordinary as his minister upon this occasion, we are told in the New Testament, was to conciliate greater attention and regard to his doctrine +. We are to take it therefore, I think, that the * first view of God in fending Christ into the world was, that, as a prophet, he might restore the true religion, and publish the glad tidings of life and immortality, and by this means reform the errors and vices of mankind.

But as he was sent to preach a most strict and boly doctrine among a people abominably corrupt and vitious; to recommend a rational and spiritual worship of the Deity to those who were fond of form and ceremony, and

[†] Matth. xxi. 37. Hebri. 1, 2. chap. ii. 2, 3.

^{* *} See the Policript, p. 349.

resolv'd the whole of religion into external rites, and traditional superstitions; and affum'd the character of their Melliah, or king, when both his circumstances in life, and the religion he taught, contradicted the expectations they had entertain'd of temporal pomp and grandeur under the Messiah's government, and confequently disappointed all the views of their covetouiness and ambition; he gain'd comparatively but few converts, and was abus'd and perfecuted by the priests and men in power, whom the multitude blindly follow'd; and at last put to death with great torment and ignominy. From this plain, and unquestionably true, account of the fact it appears, that his suffering was the natural consequence of attempting to reform the manners of a degenerate age, and opposing the superstition and darling prejudices of the fewish nation; and could not be avoided but by fuch a compliance on his part, as would have been inconfistent with virtue and integrity, or by a miraculous interpolition of providence. And God, who forefaw all this, appointed that the death of Christ, which really happen'd in the natural course of things, should be confider'd as a facrifice.

LET me observe by the way, that by considering the matter in this light, all objections against the justice of God, in determining that an *innocent* person should suffer for the guilty, are entirely obviated. For the death of Christ was not appointed absolutely and

and arbitrarily with this view; but, which is vaftly different, and can't fure have the least appearance of injustice, it fell out just as other events do, in the common course of things; and all that can be immediately attributed to God in the whole affair is, that he fent him into the world, though he forefaw the confequences of it; and order'd that his death, which would have happen'd, without a miracle, if there had been no such design, should be regarded as a sacrifice. Though, I must own, I can't see, if the matter had been otherwise, how it could be unjust, or tyrannical, to propose even to an innocent person to fuffer, with his own free consent, in order to promote fo great a good; especially if we suppose, what the Christian revelation exprefly teaches in the prefent case, that he would be glorioufly and amply rewarded for it. Having thus remov'd all the difficulties of any moment that lie against this doctrine, the only thing that remains is to shew, what wife ends might be serv'd by it.

I SHALL not inquire into the original of expiatory sacrifices, which were as early in the world as the first accounts of history; whether they were owing to an express appointment of God, as may feem probable from the History of Moses; or had their rise from the fears and superstition of mankind; who being uneasy under a sense of guilt, confus'd in their reasonings about the goodness of the Deity, and uncertain whether he would ac-

cept them, notwithstanding past offences, up on their repentance and reformation only (though, I make no doubt, they might have argued this truth, with a good deal of probability, even from the light of nature) would naturally fly to every little expedient, that their bewilder'd imaginations fuggested might be proper; and so began first with sacrificing brute creatures; and afterwards, as their diftrust and fears increased, had recourse, in many Heathen nations, to the abominable practice of buman sacrifices: Which shews plainly, that their reason was more and more perplex'd, and corrupted and darken'd to a prodigious degree, with respect to the very fundamental principles of religion and virtue.

IF facrificing was entirely an buman invention, 'twill be hard to give any account of it, more than of innumerable other superstitions, which, in the darkness and extreme depravity of the Pagan world, almost universally prevail'd. Human sacrifices are a disgrace to our nature, as well as in the highest degree dishonourable to God. And for others, there is no foundation at all in reafon to suppose, that they could expiate the guilt of moral offences, or be of the least efficacy towards re-instating the sinner in the divine favour. On the other hand, if facrifices were originally of divine appointment, they could not be defign'd to propitiate the Deity, because the very institution of them

heceffarily suppos'd that he was already propitious. For what end then were they or-Was it because the all-wise and merciful governour of the world delighted in the blood of innocent animals? or was he fond of being ferv'd with great expence and ceremony? These are low and unworthy conceptions of him. All the uses therefore that 'twas possible, in reason, for sacrifices to ferve, or consequently, that they could be defign'd to answer, if they were of divine original, may, I think, be reduc'd to these two; viz. keeping up a firm belief of God's reconcileableness, and being ready to forgive his guilty creatures upon their repentance; and, at the same time, a strong sense of the evil of fin, and their own demerit upon the account of it. In this view of standing memorials, and testimonies to the most important truths, they might be very useful; but proper expiations they neither were, nor could be, whether they began from superstition, or immediate revelation.

And now the death of Christ may be very fitly represented as a facrifice, nay, deficib'd in the strongest facrifical phrases, since it answer'd completely all the rational purposes, that expiatory facrifices could ever serve. 'Tis a standing memorial of God's being propitious, and inclin'd, as the Christian revelation assures us, not only to forgive sin in part, but entirely; and not only to remit the whole of the punishment which the sinner had deserv'd,

but, moreover, to bestow on him the glorious reward of eternal bappiness upon his sincere repentance and reformation, and persevering in a virtuous course: So that it removes the uncertainty of our natural reasonings, and is wisely calculated to maintain, in all ages, a firm belief of that fundamental principle of ALL religion, which mens superstitious fears had very much corrupted and darken'd; and gives the strongest possible encouragement to virtue.

AGAIN, the death of Christ consider'd under the notion of a facrifice will be, to the end of the world, a most lively memorial of the evil and demerit of fin. Nay, as God, in his infinite wisdom, has order'd it in such a manner, that nothing less should be confider'd as the facrifice for the fins of the world, than the death of a person so dear to him, and of fuch transcendent dignity and excellence; he has, by this appointment, declar'd much more strongly his displeasure against sin, and what the sinner bimself deferv'd to fuffer, and cut off more effectually, from wilful and impenitent offenders, all ground of presumptuous hope and confidence in his mercy, than 'twas possible to do by any facrifices of brute creatures. So that by the way in which he has condescended to pardon us, there is the utmost discouragement given to vice, and the greatest care taken, that could be by any method whatever, to preferve the bonour of the divine government, and

and the reverence due to the authority of its laws. For befides what hath been already fuggested, a sense of our ill deserts upon account of our transgressions, of which the death of Christ, represented as a sacrifice, is a most affecting memorial, has a natural tendency to inspire us with the deepest bumility, and fill us with shame and remorse for having deviated from the rule of right, and confequently, to make us more circumspect and regular in our future behaviour; and a sense of God's great goodness in freely forgiving our offences, when we had merited quite the contrary, must, if we have any sentiments of gratitude or bonour, make us folicitous to please, and fearful of offending him.

IF it be ask'd, how the death of Christ can answer the purpose of an expiatory sacrifice, when it happen'd in the natural course of things, and was not appointed directly, and only, with that view? I answer, that fuch facrifices being never defign'd to propitiate the Deity, or as proper expiations; but only as memorials, in the manner above explain'd; there is no difficulty in accounting for it. For, in all other cases, it was only God's appointing, and accepting the facrifice that made it a proper memorial; otherwife it could have no fignificancy, but what the fancy and superstition of men suggested. The use of sacrifices therefore depending entirely on his institution of them; or, at least, the use of those which were directly of his ordainordaining being that, and that only, which he intended; it follows, in the very nature of the thing, that if he is pleas'd to call the death of Christ a facrifice, and would have it consider'd under that character, it must be a fit memorial of all he design'd should be represented by it. And besides, it has been shewn, that there are several circumstances which render it a more useful memorial, than

any other facrifices that were ever offer'd.

LET me add to what has been faid concerning the advantages of confidering the death of Christ as a sacrifice in general, that by its being describ'd as the one offering, which has perfected for ever them that are fanctified*, the Christian religion has guarded, in the most effectual manner, against the use of ALL facrifices for the future; and particularly against buman sacrifices, one of the most monstrous corruptions of any thing which has born the name of religion, that ever appear'd in the world. And I would hope, that even its adversaries will allow this to be a great argument in its favour; that it was fo wifely fuited to the state of the world at that time; and not only abolish'd facrificing, but, in a way, accommodated in some meafure to the general conceptions and prejudices of mankind, and confequently the more likely to take, guarded against the revival of a custom afterwards (preserving however all the

^{*} Heb. x. 14.

Christian revelation defended. 325 rational uses of it) which had been the source of infinite superstition.

SHOULD it be faid, that there is no need of fuch memorials as facrifices were, and the death of Christ is represented to be; because if the Christian religion had afferted clearly, that God is a propitious being, and particularly express'd the terms, upon which his guilty creatures might be reconcil'd to him; if it had declar'd absolutely against the use of ALL facrifices, and condemn'd especially the barbarity and inhumanity of buman sacrifices; this alone would have been sufficient: I answer, that it might indeed have been sufficient; but how does it appear, (which is the point on which the argument wholly turns,) that the appointing a memorial of these things, in the sacrifice of Christ, is useles? Thus much is undeniable, that these things don't in the least interfere; but besides, the great end in view was most likely to be secur'd by making use both of positive declarations, and a standing memorial that will naturally give light to, and strengthen, each other. To which we may add, that the superstition of men will in some circumstances pervert the plainest words; but 'tis not so easy to evade the design of a memorial, especially in that very way, viz. under the notion of a facrifice, to which their superstition would directly tend.

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THERE is nothing, that I can find, advanc'd by the author of Christianity &c. upon this head, but what has been fully obviated, or goes upon the common mistakes of the feripture doctrine of Christ's sacrifice. Only whereas he fays, " that the reasons assign'd " for it could never influence those, who ne-" ver heard of Christ *;" I allow it. But what then? Is it not enough that they may be of great use to those who have heard of him? Nay, the doctrine of Christ's being a propitiation for the fins of the whole world is not therefore useles, because a great part of the world know nothing of it, fince it is of the highest moral advantage to those who enjoy the christian revelation; as it represents to them the universal goodness of the common father of mankind, and that in every nation, he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with bim; and consequently encourages universal benevolence, and an esteem of the whole rational creation, however distinguish'd by external privileges; and restrains that fpiritual pride and infolence, which prompts many christians, to the reproach of our holy religion (and is indeed too common in all religious fects, who imagine the fuperiority to be on their fide) to confine the favour of God to themselves, and despise, censure, and condemn all others.

I PROCEED now to point out a few of the excellencies, and eminent advantages, of that positive institution of Christianity, in which we commemorate the death of Christ; and particularly under the character of a sacrifice. And the moral uses of it are so plain, and withal so various, and exceeding great, that it may be question'd, whether any thing of a positive nature can possibly be appointed, that has a stronger tendency to promote the practice of virtue; nay, as will sufficiently appear by just enumerating them, of the most amiable, generous, and beroic virtue.

In general, as we perform this service in bonour of Christ, we thereby, as well as by baptism, solemnly profess our belief of his religion, and consequently engage to make it the rule of our behaviour. - But to mention some of its peculiar advantages. Frequently commemorating the death of Christ, as a facrifice for fin, must maintain in us a constant firm belief of that first principle even of natural religion, that God is ready to forgive all fincere penitents, and a rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and at the same time, as it sets before us our own great demerit, must impress a strong and lively sense of the goodness of God, in freely pardoning our offences, and rewarding so abundantly our sincere though imperfect virtue; the natural consequence of which will be, shame for having dona

done amis, and affronted the government of so gracious and compassionate a being, and the highest abborrence of such an ungenerous conduct for the future. If we reflect with becoming gratitude on God's wonderful benevolence and mercy to mankind, 'tis impossible but this must produce a chearful obedience to all his commands; and especially, a delight in doing good after his most excellent and perfect example. - Again, when we remember, that the very defign of the death of Christ was to redeem us from all iniquity, and make us zealous of good works *, and that, upon these terms only, we are to expect any advantage from it; nothing can have a more powerful tendency to excite to strict and universal purity.

FARTHER, if we consider our partaking of this ordinance as a communion (the cup of blessing, which we bless, as the communion of the blood of Christ, and the bread, which we break, as the communion of the body of Christ, +) by which we acknowledge ALL sincere Christians, however denominated, and distinguished, as our brethren, members, together with ourselves, of the same spiritual body, or society, intitled to the same privileges, and having the same hope of their calling; that we, being many, are one bread, and one body, because we are all partakers of that one bread; this must be of excellent use to promote

* Tit, ii. 14. † 1 Cor. x. 16. ‡ Ver. 17.

mutual esteem, concord, and barmony; and if the true intention of it was follow'd, would make Christians regard one another according to their real merit, and not for the triffing peculiarities of any particular fect; and effectually reconcile all party-differences: by which means, impositions upon conscience, violent controversies, unscriptural terms of communion, schisms, persecutions, &c. which have been of fatal consequence both to religion, and civil fociety, would be entirely prevented. - But lest we should stop here, and confine our benevolence to the houshold of faith; confidering the death of Christ as a propitiation for the fins of the whole world will naturally inspire an universal love of mankind. For there is an irrefistible force in the apostle's argument, If God fo loved us, we, who are dependent upon, and oblig'd to, each other, and can't subfist without a mutual intercourse of good offices, ought much more to love one anoface, when we rehead, that the co ther +.

INDEED, commemorating the death of Christ, in a devout and solemn manner, in its entire design, and with ALL its circumstances, will suggest the greatest and most generous sentiments, and afford motives to the most extensive and beroic benevolence, that mankind can possibly practise. For besides what has been already hinted, if we consider that God gave his Son to die for us while we

were enemies*, this must kill all the seeds of malice and revenge in us; and raise such a noble spirit of humanity and compassion, as the greateft injuries shall not bear down and extinguish; which will be farther strengthen'd by reflecting on the behaviour of Christ, who, under the greatest abuses and indignities, pitied, and pray'd for, his persecutors. - His example likewise, in chusing to die rather than forfeit his integrity, and to promote the happiness of mankind, will teach us, (and accordingly 'tis thus inculcated by St. John +) to facrifice all private confiderations, nay, life itself for the public good; and besides, has a tendency to beget in us an entire submission to providence under the worst circumstances that may befal us, and an undaunted fortitude, resolution, and constancy of mind, when we are call'd to fuffer in a good cause, and for the advancement of truth and virtue. - And all these arguments will receive an additional force when we reflect, that the example we commemorate is that of a friend and generous benefactor, an example that is in itself amiable, and which we should consequently be ambitious to imitate; and from the innocence and dignity of the sufferer.

general des intrategrand affect being As therefore it appears, that we can't commemorate the death of Christ, in the manner in which Christianity has commanded it, without having our resolutions to practise

universal virtue strengthen'd, and improving in the greatest, most amiable, useful, and godlike dispositions, which this institution has a peculiar and most admirable aptitude to excite, and confirm; need I add any thing more to prove that 'tis worthy of God, a being of absolute purity, a being of most perfect and universal goodness? Or that 'tis becoming the wisdom of his providence, and suitable to the great end he has in view, the rectitude and bappiness of the moral creation, to oblige us by a law made on purpose, and the practice of a plain fignificant rite, to enter frequently upon such reflections as are of the utmost moral use, and yet, without some inflitution of this kind (confidering how little inclin'd the bulk of mankind are to think, unless they are put upon it) are likely to be omitted, or very much neglected; and besides, can't reasonably be expected to have that weight and influence in a flight, curfory, occafional meditation, as they will very probably, when they are confider'd as a folemn act of devotion, which we perform in obedience to an express divine command?

A THIRD thing of a positive nature in the Christian revelation is, worshipping God through a mediator. Now 'tis most evident, that the general notion of a mediator between God and man (the term being indefinite) can't in itself be absurd; but will be irrational, or otherwise, just as 'tis explain'd, and the nature, design, and uses of the mediation stated. And

And when Christ is stiled a mediator, we can only learn from the New Testament what the word implies; and in that sense alone, in which he is there represented under that character, are christians oblig'd to worship God through a mediator. So that we ought not to fansy difficulties arbitrarily, and frighten ourselves with mere sounds; but if we would proceed fairly, must consider whether there are really any objections against the account which the gospel gives of this matter.

AND the sum of the Christian doctrine is this, and this only. (1.) That we worthip God in the name of Christ, i. e. according to bis directions; encourag'd by the express affurances, which God afforded the world by bim, that he is a propitious being; and that our worship, form'd upon the principles, and conducted by the rules, which Christianity prescribes, will be accepted. (2.) That we worship him as that most gracious Being, the father of ALL mankind, who, by Christ, has given the Gentile world as well as the Yews a revelation of his will, and express promises of pardon, and eternal life; so that through him, we both have an access, by one spirit, unto the father*. (3.) As a Being who has declar'd, that we are reconciled to him by the death of his Son +, who, for reasons above explain'd, is represented as putting away fin

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^{*} Eph. ii. 13. † Rom. v. 10.

Christian revelation defended. 333 by the facrifice of bimfelf *; the wisdom, and goodness of which constitution we are thankfully to acknowledge. St. Paul indeed speaks of Christ as interceding for us, in consequence of the facrifice which he had offer'd; but, I apprehend, we are under no necessity to understand these passages strictly: for as the epistles, in which such language is used, were written to converted Jews wholly, or to churches where there was a mixture of Yews with Gentiles; he might only defign by it (which appears plainly to have been his view in the greatest part of the epistle to the Hebrews) that there was something analogous, in the Christian religion, to what they so highly valued in the Mosaic institution; but of a much more excellent kind, and attended with more extensive and lasting advantages. (4.) Another thing implied in the Christian doctrine of worshipping God through a mediator is, that we confider him as one who governs us, and bestows bleffings upon us, not immediately +, but by Christ; whom, as a reward of his perfect innocence, and voluntary sufferings for the good of mankind, he has constituted, under himself, Lord of all |; giving him all power in heaven, and in earth **; by whom he has reveal'd his will to us, and given us laws; affords us needful assistance in the discharge of our duty, and support under our various trials; and will, at last, judge

^{*} Heb. ix. 26. † Jo. v. 21, 23. ‡ 1 Cor. viii. 6. Acts x. 36. Phil. ii. 9, 10, 11. ** Matt. xxviii. 18.

the world in righteousness, and render to every man according to his deeds *. And finally, that we worship Christ, as having the mediatorial kingdom conferr'd on him by the Father, and in obedience to his command †; ascribing particularly glory, and dominion to him ‡, who, by the wise constitution of God, is our saviour, and king; but always in subordination to the glory of the one God and Father of all, who alone has a right to our supreme worship and obedience ||.

Now what is there in all this that is in the least dishonourable to God, or inconsistent with any principle of natural religion? Reafon indeed could never have discover'd it, but, when it is reveal'd, can object nothing against it; and what, in the judgment of the most strict and impartial reason, may be true, and belongs to a scheme of religion, which, in all the parts of it, has a visible tendency to promote the highest perfection and bappiness of human nature, miracles undeniably prove to be actually true. The appointing the death of Christ to be consider'd as a facrifice has already been sufficiently vindicated; and this unavoidably infers the reafonableness of worshipping God under the character of that all-wife and most merciful Being, who has fix'd upon this method of pardoning finners, and receiving them into

^{*} Acts xvii. 31. Rom. ii. 6, & 16 comp. ‡ Heb. xiii. 21. 2 Pet. ii. 18. Rev. v. 13.

[†] Jo. v. 23. || Phil. ii. 11.

favour. - His appointing Christ to manage, under bimfelf, the government of the world, is repugnant to no one principle of reafon; but on the contrary, there is a beautiful congruity between his being constituted our Saviour, and the immediate bestower of the divine bleffings and favours upon mankind; and we can't but approve of God's rewarding, in fo extraordinary a manner, a person of his unspotted innocence, and one who generously condescended to take upon him the human nature, and both did, and suffer'd, so much to maintain the cause of virtue, and promote our happiness. - Then as for the worship which the New Testament directs us to pay to Christ, since 'tis no more than the respect which is properly due to one, whom God has invested with the characters of our faviour, and ruler, and made bead over all things to the church *; it must be as necessarily fit, while those relations subsist, as the duties even of natural morality. And it can be no derogation from the absolute and supreme perfection of the first, and greatest, of beings, that an inferior is respected in proportion to his merit and dignity, and honour'd with subordinate worship, in obedience to his express command; because this is, really, an act of bomage to bimself, and an acknowledgement of his unrival'd and matchless excellence; and fo far from giving his glory to another, that 'tis only offering that other what be could

^{*} Eph. i. 22.

not receive; fince it would be an affront and disparagement to him to be serv'd with any worship of an inferior kind, with any worship of which he is not the supreme and ultimate object, and all the reasons for which do not center absolutely and entirely in himself.

Christ's mediation serves, in general, the same purposes with that of his sacrifice. For at the same time that it necessarily supposes God to be propitious, it impresses a constant sense of the evil of sin, and the sinner's unworthiness of the divine savour upon the account of it; and consequently is a standing lecture of humility. So that 'tis calculated, in all ages, to inspire moral sentiments of universal advantage (especially considering how apt mankind are to be blind to their own saults, and presume upon the mercy of God) and must, if rightly consider'd, be always a strong motive to purity and virtue.

FROM what has been faid it appears, that the scripture doctrine of a mediator is entirely rational, and subservient to moral purposes; and that there is not the least foundation in it for those low and unworthy conceptions of the Deity, to which (as the author of Christianity &c. imagines) "the mediatory "Gods among the Heathen owe their rise *."

^{*} Christianity &c. p. 85.

⁺ Christianity &c. p. 85.

nay unfollicited goodness. He is describ'd as the original contriver and author of it, prompted by nothing but his effential and innate benevolence; and Christ to have acted only by bis direction, and according to the plan bis infinite wisdom had form'd. So that 'tis not more plainly, nor fo frequently, inculcated, that we are bound thankfully to acknowledge the condescention of Christ in the part he fustain'd, as that our ultimate obligations of love and gratitude are to the supreme God, and Father of all; even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort +, who hath bleffed us with all spiritual blessings, in heavenly places, through him; — Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ, to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein be bas made us accepted in the beloved; and wherein he bath abounded towards us in all wifdom, and prudence *.

THERE is one remark more, which our author hath made, that I think worth reciting: "However (fays he) the heathens "allowing one, and but one most high God, did not so far derogate from the honour of the one true God, as to pretend that the most distinguish'd among their several mediators was equal to him; Equality and Mediation being as inconsistent as Equality and

" Supremacy. And they would have made " their religion an errant jumble, if they had " worshipped these Gods sometimes as me-" diators only; fometimes as fovereign dif-" pofers of things; and fometimes as both " together +." I think it, I fay, worth while to recite this passage, not because 'tis a just objection against the Christian religion itself, which teaches nothing at all of this mysterious incomprehensible divinity; but that christians may see how much it suffers by the darkness and confusion of buman schemes, which are not only father'd upon it, but rank'd among its fundamental and most important doctrines. And, I hope, fince this is a common cause (the honour of Christianity being evidently concern'd in it) they will all agree to lay aside unscriptural subtilties, and distinctive party phrases, and be content to represent the Christian doctrine just as they find it in the writings of the New Testament; and then they will have but little to fear from the skill or malice of its adversaries. For though some modern scholastic explications of it may be attended with insuperable difficulties, and always distress those who undertake the defence of them; the original revelation itself will, I am persuaded, stand the test of reason, and bear even a severe and critical, provided it be likewise an bonest and impartial, examination.

AND it will confirm us in this belief, that we find the most able of its opposers (not excepting the author of Christianity &c. himself) generally bend all their aim this way, and level their objections not against the New Testament directly, but against those gross misrepresentations, and corruptions of its genuine and real fense, which the weakness and superstition of men, or perhaps worse causes, have introduc'd; or if they sometimes attack the original records of our religion, 'tis by interpreting passages so strictly and rigorously, as could never be their most obvious and natural meaning; or else, by picking little scraps out of a connected discourse, that, by themselves, may well seem odd and unaccountble, and yet have a great propriety and beauty, when confider'd in their connection: which, it must be allow'd, is a more cunning, if it be not altogether so fair a way of proceeding. For 'tis much fafer to fall upon the confusions and inconsistencies of party writers, than upon original Christianity itself; or if it be a man's defign to run down any book whatever, the more loofely he reads, and the oftner he quotes passages merely for their found, the better; the less he understands it, the more fault he is likely to find; and so the number of his objections, at least, which perhaps may influence fome weak people, or others who are already disaffected; the number, I say, of his objections, if not the weight, will swell considerably. But that any perfons

Christian revelation defended. 341

fons who act thus should assume the character of free-thinkers, and treat all the rest of the world as bigots and enthusiasts, is most amazing; since such a conduct is, in truth, the farthest distant that can be from a generous temper; and argues, on the contrary, besides intolerable vanity and insolence, great narrowness of mind, and the most abject and slavish prejudice.

THUS have I finish'd all that I proposed in this argument, and confider'd, fo far as they affect either the usefulness, or the truth and excellency, of the christian revelation, all the main reasonings of the author of Christianity &c. in the first part of his design. And indeed, from what appears, he is determin'd to do no farther execution; so that there was no need of staying for the fecond part, which, if there be nothing in it but what the author hath promis'd, will be perfectly barmless. Nay, the most valuable part of it, (for I think we have but little concern with the fentiments of Fews, Gentiles, and Mahometans, or even of the fathers of the church, which are testimonies entirely foreign in a matter of rational enquiry, but are intended however for the amplification and ornament of the work;) the most valuable part of it, I fay, is nothing new, and nothing but what has been perform'd most excellently, and with the greatest strength of reason, by several christian writers *. It may therefore be justly

* Vide Christianity &c. p. 427, 429.

342 The usefulness and truth, &c.

presum'd, that whatever other works of this kind the ingenious author may be engag'd in, they will not divert him from the more necessary business of reviewing, upon all proper occasions, what he has already written; and that having appeal'd in it to the judgment of the public, he will not expect to be believ'd implicitly; but think himself oblig'd either to defend it, or else, in a frank, open manner acknowledge his mistakes, like an honest man, and a sincere lover of truth.

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HAT I have faid concerning the Sacrifice of Christ being thought not to be the true scripture doctrine by some CHRISTIANS, whom I should be very forry to

offend, while I am maintaining the common cause of Christianity against U N-BELIEVERS; I think it proper to review it a little, and offer a sew things for the farther explaining and illustrating this important subject.

I Am persuaded, that those who have excepted against what I have offer'd have, generally, misunderstood me. But as my meaning has been mistaken, not only by common superficial readers, but likewise by persons, whose good sense and judgment can't be disputed; I must, in modesty, suppose, that there is some obscurity in the account

count which I have given, owing to this at least, viz. to its being too fhort and general.

To remove objections therefore, and fet the matter in a clear light, I defire it may be consider'd, that the New Testament only lays down the doctrine relating to Christ's Sacrifice, but does not enter directly, and particularly, into the reasons of it; whereas my only defign was to shew, against the oppofers of revelation, that this part of the Christian doctrine is wife and rational. In order to which, I indeed took notice of some absurd notions that are father'd upon Christianity, though there is not the least hint about them in the whole New Testament; but allow'd every thing that the Scripture has plainly and distinctly afferted upon this head, without the least thought of evading the grammatical and obvious sense of any of the texts, by strain'd and unnatural criticisms. I have expresly affirm'd that the death of Christ is very fitly represented s as a facrifice, nay, described in the strongeft facrifical phrases *;" and gone all along upon the supposition, that the first and most obvious sense of those texts, viz. that ke appear'd to put away sin by the sacrifice of bimself +, gave bis life a ransom for mamy +, that we are redeemed with the precious

F P. 321.

† Heb. ix. 26.

‡ Mat. xx. 28.

blood

blood of Christ *, and that God fent his fon to be the propitiation for our fins +, and the like; I have gone all along, I fay, upon the supposition, that the first and most obvious sense of those texts is, that by the wife appointment of God, we are to consider the death of Christ as the thing, upon the account of which he pardons our fins, and confers life and immortality upon us; I fav, by the appointment of God, because the whole efficacy of it (the death of Christ not being necessarily, and in its own nature, an expiatory facrifice) must arise from his ordaining, and accepting it as fuch. And if this be allow'd, let it be call'd the term or condition of our forgiveness, I shall not think it needful to dispute about mere words, when the utmost such expressions amount to can be no more than this, which I never denied. and now freely grant, that the all-wife Governour of the world thought fit to fix upon this method of pardoning fin, and, in this way only, to declare his accepting his guilty creatures upon their repentance, and reward their fincere, though imperfect, virtue.

FROM this short account, it will, I conceive, clearly appear, that I have not miscrepresented the Christian doctrine relating to Christ's sacrifice, and that the objections against what I have written upon this head have been owing, in a great measure, to a

* 1 Pet. i. 18, 19.

misapprebension of my true design. Several of my readers feem to have imagin'd, that what I have offer'd was defign'd as an account of the scripture doctrine, or as an explication of texts, nay, that I thought the word sacrifice to fignify, strictly, a memorial. Whereas my only intention was to shew (allowing the doctrine itself to be just as it is represented in the writings of the New Testament, and taking the expressions there us'd in their most obvious and natural sense) the wise ends that might be ferv'd by, it; or, in other words, without questioning in the least that the death of Christ is, by God's appointment, a propitiation, a sacrifice, an atonement, &c. to give some account of the reafons, which may be suppos'd to have determin'd his infinite wisdom to choose this way of shewing mercy to finners, and receiving them into favour. And my affigning as a wife reason for the institution of sacrifices, that they were proper and useful memorials, was a very clear intimation to the reader, that I had different ideas to the two words: For if the ideas were exactly the same, I must not only have thought that facrifices were user ful memorials, but that every useful memorial is a facrifice; of which, I believe, I need not clear myself.

AND fince it appears, that those texts, which represent the death of Christ as a facrifice for fin, a sin-offering, and the like,

and speak of it in the strongest sacrifical phrases, contain nothing inconsistent with what I have advanc'd, because I have no dispute, upon this head, with either friends, or enemies, of Christianity (the not mentioning which particularly, in the foregoing discourse, I acknowledge to have been a great defect, as it would probably have prevented the objections of many bonest and judicious readers) I can think but of one passage, relating to the doctrine itself, that needs to be a little explain'd, and vindicated, viz. " that " the death of Christ would have happen'd " [i. e. fo far as appears to us, or as we can " judge from what is reveal'd in the holy " scriptures] if it had never been design'd as " a facrifice; and confequently was not ap-" pointed absolutely, and solely with a view " to that *." Now this, which I apprehend to be of great importance in the present argument, I can, as yet, fee no reason to recede from. I chose to express myself in this manner, because the Gospel-history most evidently represents the matter thus, viz. " that the Son of God, for publishing the " will of his heavenly Father in a corrupt " and degenerate age, was abused and per-" fecuted, and by wicked hands crucified " and flain." This is the plain fact as it is there related; a fact, which it would be mere trifling to attempt to prove; and, in

my opinion, it can't be denied, that the. death of Christ was "the natural confe-" quence of his attempting to reform a " corrupt and vitious people, and opposing " their superstition, and darling prejudices," without destroying the truth of that history, and consequently of Christianity itself. Since therefore his death was " the natural con-" sequence of his integrity in his prophetic " character," and could not have been avoided but by infincere compliances on his part, or by a miraculous interpolition; we must suppose " that it would have actually " happen'd if it had never been appointed as " a facrifice," or be forc'd to make precarious suppositions, about which the New Testament is wholly filent. And if, as far as appears to us (the Christian revelation giving us no ground to carry our conjectures farther, and there being not the least foundation in reason to suppose, that God would not have fent his Son into the world with this view only, that he might make a revelation of his mind and will, fuited to the corrupt and degenerate state of the world, though he foresaw it would end in his death) if I say, as far as appears to us " the death of Christ would have hap-" pen'd, though it had never been appointed " as a facrifice," it necessarily follows, that, as far as we can judge, " it was not ordain'd " absolutely, and solely with a view to that." Nay farther, we may fairly conclude, (at least this is the utmost we can conclude, if we

go no farther than we have fure principles to reason from) that the necessity of this method of pardoning fin was not an absolute necessity, but a necessity arising from circumstances, or more properly, a fitness which the circumstances of things suggested; i. e. in other words, it was fixed upon by the infinite wisdom of God, which always does what is best, because it was an over-ruling and directing a natural event to serve the wifest and most useful purpose, for the honour of his government, and the good of his creatures. But on the other hand, whereas I have faid, that " the first view of God, in " fending Christ into the world, was, that, as " prophet, he might restore the true religi-" on, &c. *:" I should now rather choose to express myself thus, that he pitch'd upon so great and excellent a person, both that, by the dignity of his character, he might conciliate a greater attention and regard to his doctrine, and that the death of this divine messenger, which he foresaw would happen, if not miraculously prevented, might answer the wife and valuable ends of a facrifice for fin; without determining which of these was the first, or principal, reason. For it's probable that both of them together (fince it appears they concur) and neither fingly, influenc'd the all-wife governour of the world to employ his only begotten Son upon

^{*} Page 317.

this occasion; by whose mediation those ends are more effectually promoted, than they could be by that of any other being whatsoever.

THE death of Christ was undoubtedly predetermin'd, but that does not prove that it did not happen in the natural course of things, i. e. in the fame manner, and by the same kind of instruments, as the death of other prophets, and righteous men, who have preach'd repentance and reformation to an ignorant and degenerate age. So far indeed it may be ascrib'd to God, that it could not have happen'd if he had not fent him into the world; nay farther, that he fent him when he forefaw this consequence of it, and upon that fore-knowledge how the event would be, if the malice of his enemies was fuffer'd to take its course, determin'd not to interpose, but to permit it; or, in other words, determin'd that it should be. But to proceed farther than this, we have, I think, no ground in reason, or warrant from Holy Scripture. On the contrary, St. Peter expresly says, that our Saviour was deliver'd by the determinate counsel, and fore-knowledge of God *; the most obvious and natural sense of which is, by the purpose of God to leave the Jews to themselves, upon the fore-knowledge that they would then put him to death. And to

^{*} Acts ii. 23.

argue from the nature of the thing itself; as the destroying such an innocent and useful person, a divine messenger, and the Son of God, was unquestionably a very wicked action, it will not, I presume, be thought, that the most wise, and holy governour and judge of the world could have determin'd any thing about it further, than to suffer natural causes to operate, and the event (which he foresaw would happen without a miraculous interposition) to take place.

HOWEVER, tho the death of Christ fell out in the natural course of things, it was not thus a sacrifice. That was owing entirely to the purpose and decree of God, and consequently, upon the fore-knowledge that his death would otherwise happen, was abfolutely predetermin'd, and in the ftrongest and fullest sense, that any texts, either in the Old or New Testament, speak of it: I shall only add, that those who believe that the death of Christ was absolutely determin'd as a sacrifice, otherwise than upon the fore-knowledge that it would happen in the manner it did, must be oblig'd to prove, that if there had been no need of his coming into the world as a prophet, he would have been fent with no other view, than to die; nay farther, that if the Tews, who were free agents, and not under a necessity of putting him to death, instead of rejecting and persecuting, had receiv'd and honour'd him as a prophet, God would immediately

mediately have interpos'd, and have appointed the manner in which, and the instrument by whom, he should have been directly offered as a Sacrifice; which appear to me to be mere imaginary schemes, that have no foundation either in reason, or revelation.

NOTHING now remains, but briefly to review what I have offer'd concerning the uses of expiatory sacrifices, and particularly the wife ends that might be answer'd by God's appointing the death of Christ to be consider'd under that character. And that no facrifices of this kind (nay not that of Christ himfelf) were defign'd to propitiate the Deity, that they could not be necessary with respect to him, to incline him to be favourable and gracious to mankind, follows necessarily from hence, that they derive their whole efficacy and value from his appointment; and " the " very institution of them" must, in the nature of the thing, suppose " that he was " already propitious *," already dispos'd to be merciful and forgive the offences of his creatures, and only fix'd upon this as the most rational and proper way of dispensing his mercy. This I take to be demonstration, to which nothing needs be added. However, we may observe, to strengthen and confirm it farther, that the facrifice of Christ is reprefented, throughout the whole New Testament, as proceeding from the love and compassion of God towards mankind, but never as the cause of it; as the effect of his mercy, not the argument or motive inducing him to be merciful: this is the constant strain of the Gospel, and there is not so much as a single passage which intimates the contrary.

In like manner, as facrifices derive all their virtue from God's ordaining and accepting them, and forgiveness of sin is always defcrib'd as an act of free and voluntary favour in the Deity; it plainly appears, that they neither were, nor could be, in the sense in which I have us'd the expression, proper expiations; i. e. that there was nothing, in their abstract nature, that could atone for moral guilt, or merit pardon, or, in other words, that there was no necessary connection in reason, independent on the will and pleasure of God, between offering the sacrifice, and the forgiveness of the offender.

WHAT other use then could they be defign'd to serve (since they could neither be intended to propitiate our most merciful God, nor, in a strict sense, to expiate the guilt of sin*) besides that of being "standing me-A a "morials

^{*} When the words, propitiation and expiation, are used in scripture, they have, I apprehend, a very different meaning: and the truth of the case I take to be this. God was inclin'd, by his innate goodness and mercy, to pardon the sins of mankind upon their repentance, and receive them into favour; but at the same

" morials of God's reconcileableness, for in-" stance, and readiness to forgive his guilty " creatures upon their repentance, of his " ftrict and absolute purity, and of the great evil and demerit of fin?" And what other reason, can we suppose, determin'd his infinite wisdom to appoint them, but their moral influence, and particularly, that he might exercise his mercy towards mankind in fuch a manner, as would most effectually support the practice of virtue, and discourage vice and wickedness? By this method of grace and pardon, he has most awfully demonstrated his spotless purity, and irreconcileable aversion to fin, and wisely maintain'd the bonour of his moral government, by doing what is best calculated to promote the great end of it, the perfection and happiness of his fubjects.

I HOPE what I have now added will fatisfy the friends of Christianity, as well as

fame time was resolved to do it in such a way as would be most honourable to his persections and government, and consequently was most becoming a wise and holy governour. As the sacrifice of Christ therefore, which he appointed, though it did not incline him to be merciful, is the way in which he chose actually to dispense his mercy, Christ is the propitiation: and because it is the method in which he actually forgives our offences, and discharges us upon our sincere repentance, from guilt; in this sense it may be stilled an Expiation. And 'tis upon the same account that we are said to be reconciled to God by the death of his son, Rom. 5. 10. though we never meet in the New Testament with such an expression as this, that God was thereby reconciled to us; because, perhaps, it would convey to the bulk of mankind a very different idea, contrary to what has been shewn to be the reason of the thing, and the general tenour of the Christian revelation.

filence the cavils of its adversaries. And I can affure the reader, that as I would not pay fo much deference to human explications of scripture, how popular soever, as to betray any important and useful truth; so neither would I deviate, in the least, from commonly received principles, for the sake of being singular.

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